MARVEL® GRAPHIC NOVEL

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The Aladdin EFFECT

By James Shooter, David Michelinie, Greg LaRocque and Vince Colletta

STAN LEE PRESENTS
A MARVEL® GRAPHIC NOVEL

The Aladdin EFFECT

BY
DAVID MICHELINIE,
GREG LaROCQUE
AND
VINCE COLLETTA
FROM A PLOT BY JIM SHOOTER

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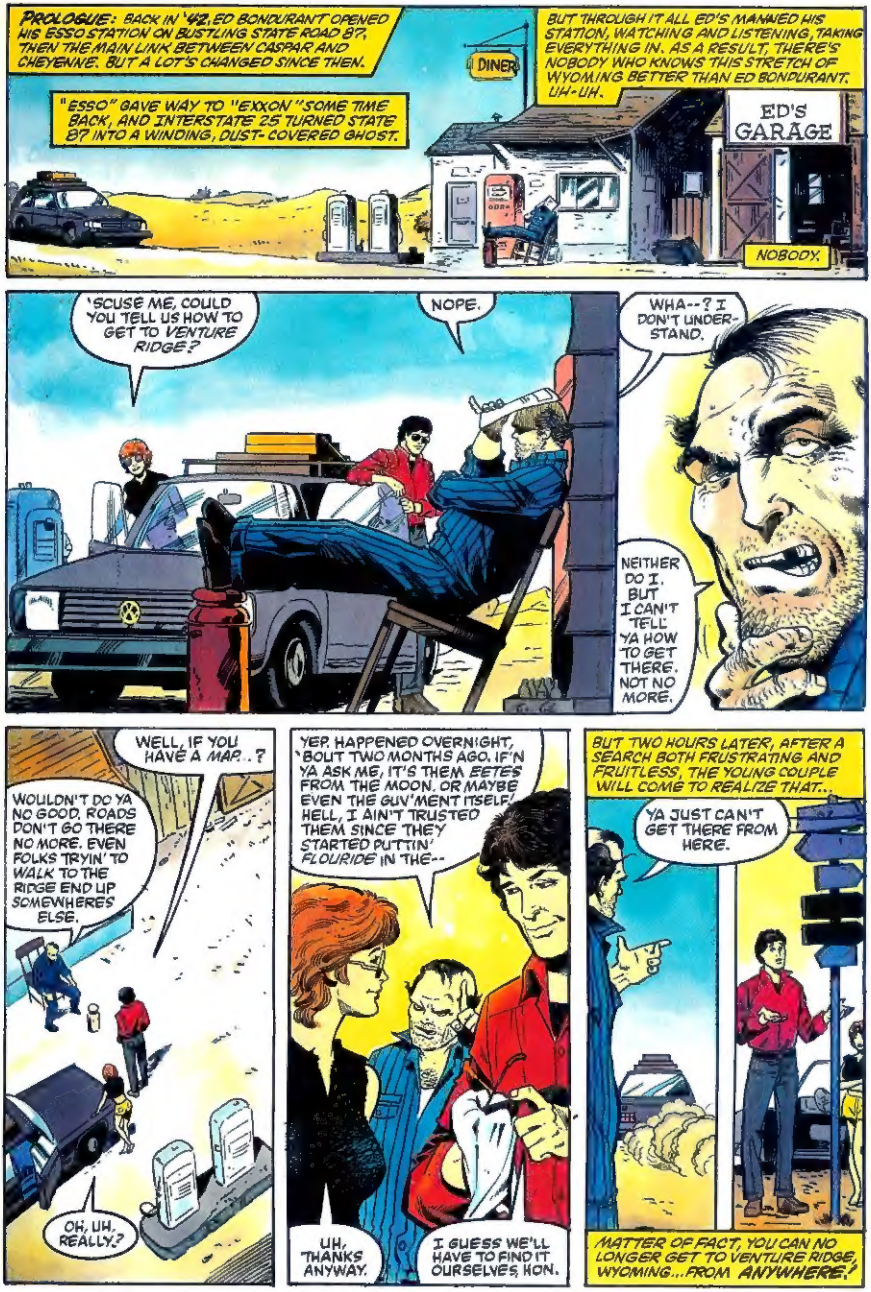
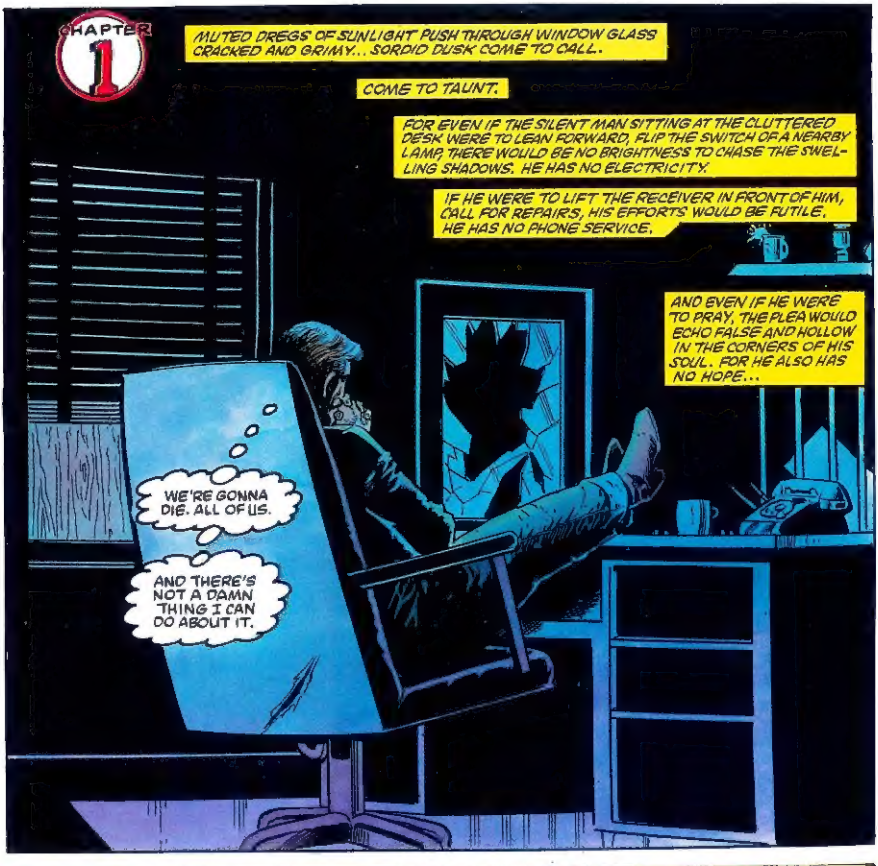
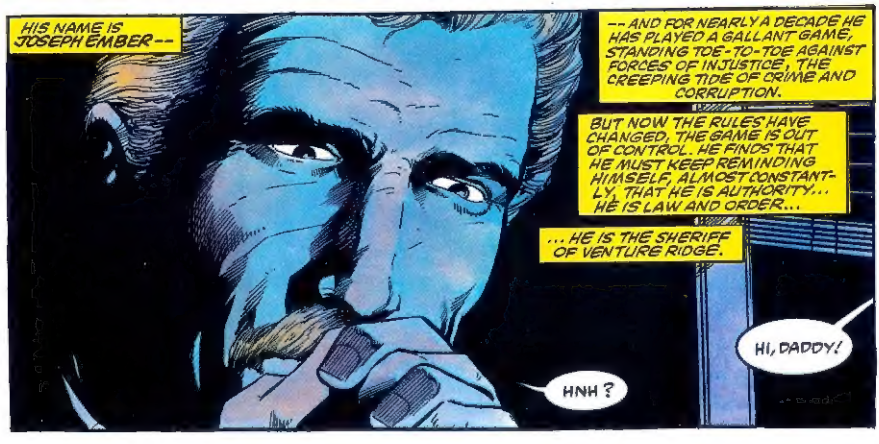
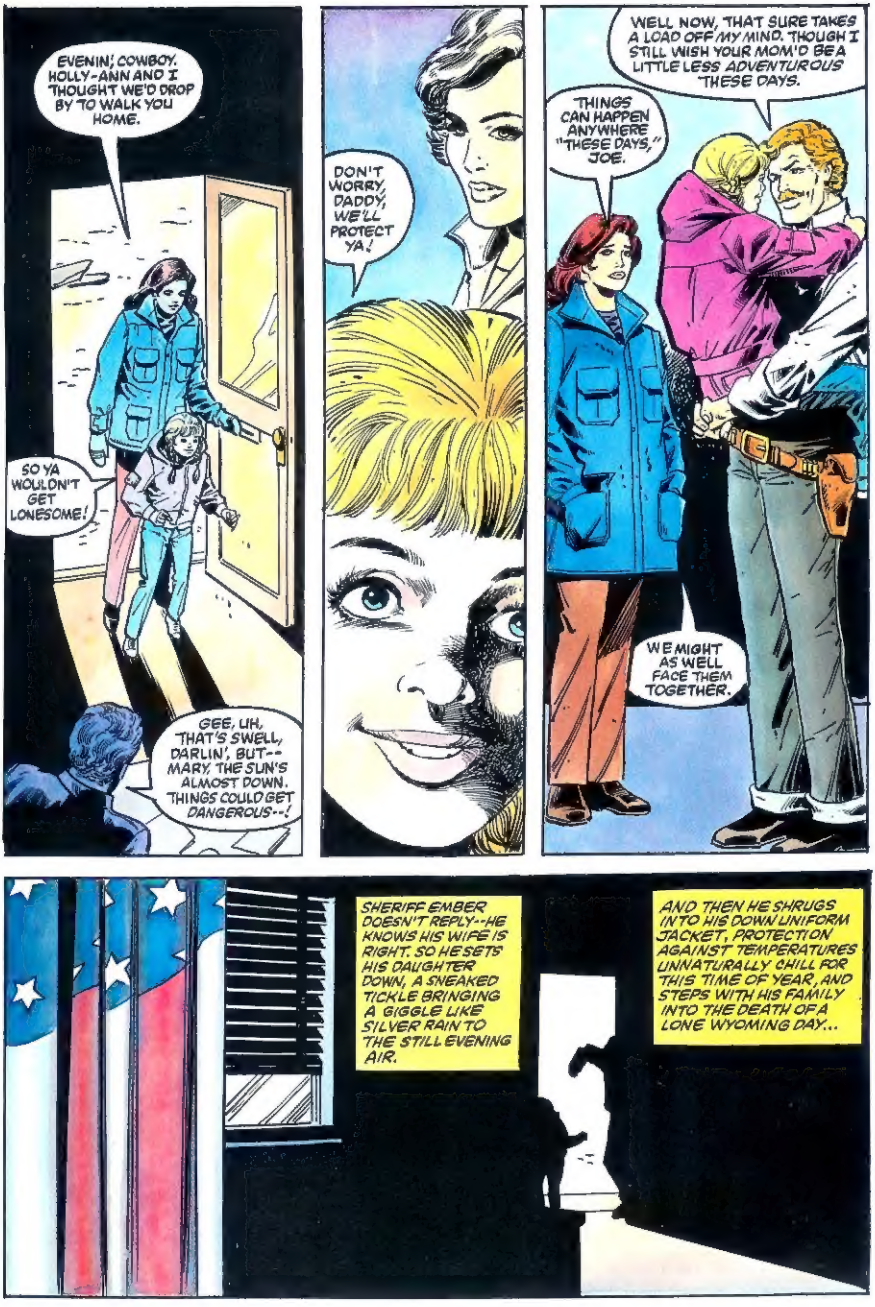
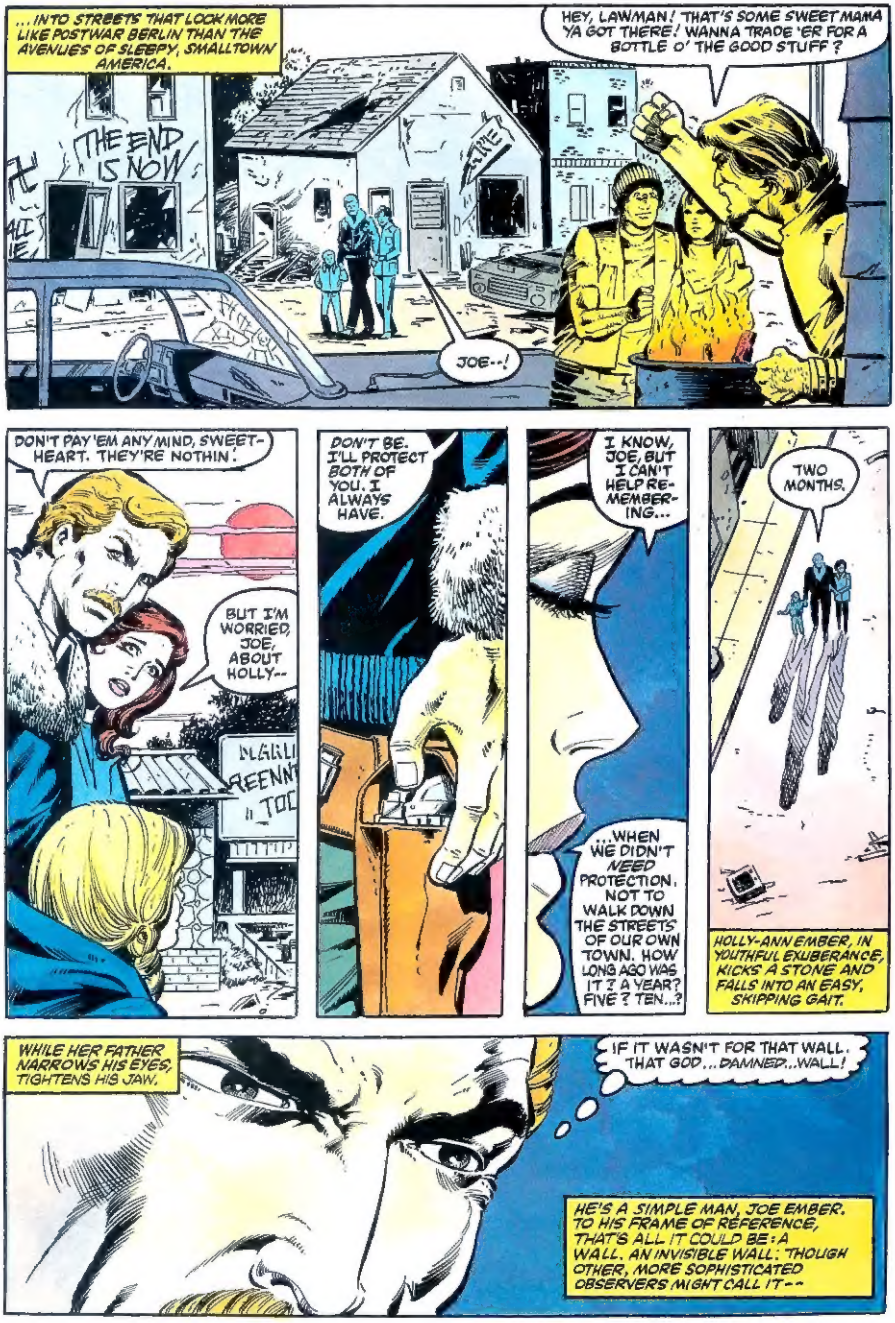

PROLOGUE: BACK IN '42, ED BONDURANT OPENED HIS ESSO STATION ON BUSTLING STATE ROAD 87, THEN THE MAIN LINK BETWEEN CASPAR AND CHEYENNE. BUT A LOT'S CHANGED SINCE THEN.
"ESSO" GAVE WAY TO "EXXON" SOME TIME BACK, AND INTERSTATE 25 TURNED STATE 87 INTO A WINDING, DUST-COVERED GHOST.
DINER
BUT THROUGH IT ALL ED'S MANNED HIS STATION, WATCHING AND LISTENING, TAKING EVERYTHING IN. AS A RESULT, THERE'S NOBODY WHO KNOWS THIS STRETCH OF WYOMING BETTER THAN ED BONDURANT. UH-UH.
ED'S GARAGE
NOBODY.
'SCUSE ME, COULD YOU TELL US HOW TO GET TO VENTURE RIDGE?
NOPE.
WHA--? I DON'T UNDERSTAND.
NEITHER DO I. BUT I CAN'T TELL YA HOW TO GET THERE. NOT NO MORE.
WELL, IF YOU HAVE A MAP..?
WOULDN'T DO YA NO GOOD. ROADS DON'T GO THERE NO MORE. EVEN FOLKS TRYIN' TO WALK TO THE RIDGE END UP SOMEWHERE'S ELSE.
OH, UH. REALLY.?
YEP. HAPPENED OVERNIGHT, 'BOUT TWO MONTHS AGO. IF'N YA ASK ME, IT'S THEM EETES FROM THE MOON. OR MAYBE EVEN THE GUV'MENT ITSELF. HELL, I AIN'T TRUSTED THEM SINCE THEY STARTED PUTTIN' FLOURIDE IN THE--
UH, THANKS ANYWAY.
I GUESS WE'LL HAVE TO FIND IT OURSELVES, HON.
BUT TWO HOURS LATER, AFTER A SEARCH BOTH FRUSTRATING AND FRUITLESS, THE YOUNG COUPLE WILL COME TO REALIZE THAT...
YA JUST CAN'T GET THERE FROM HERE.
MATTER OF FACT, YOU CAN NO LONGER GET TO VENTURE RIDGE, WYOMING...FROM ANYWHERE.

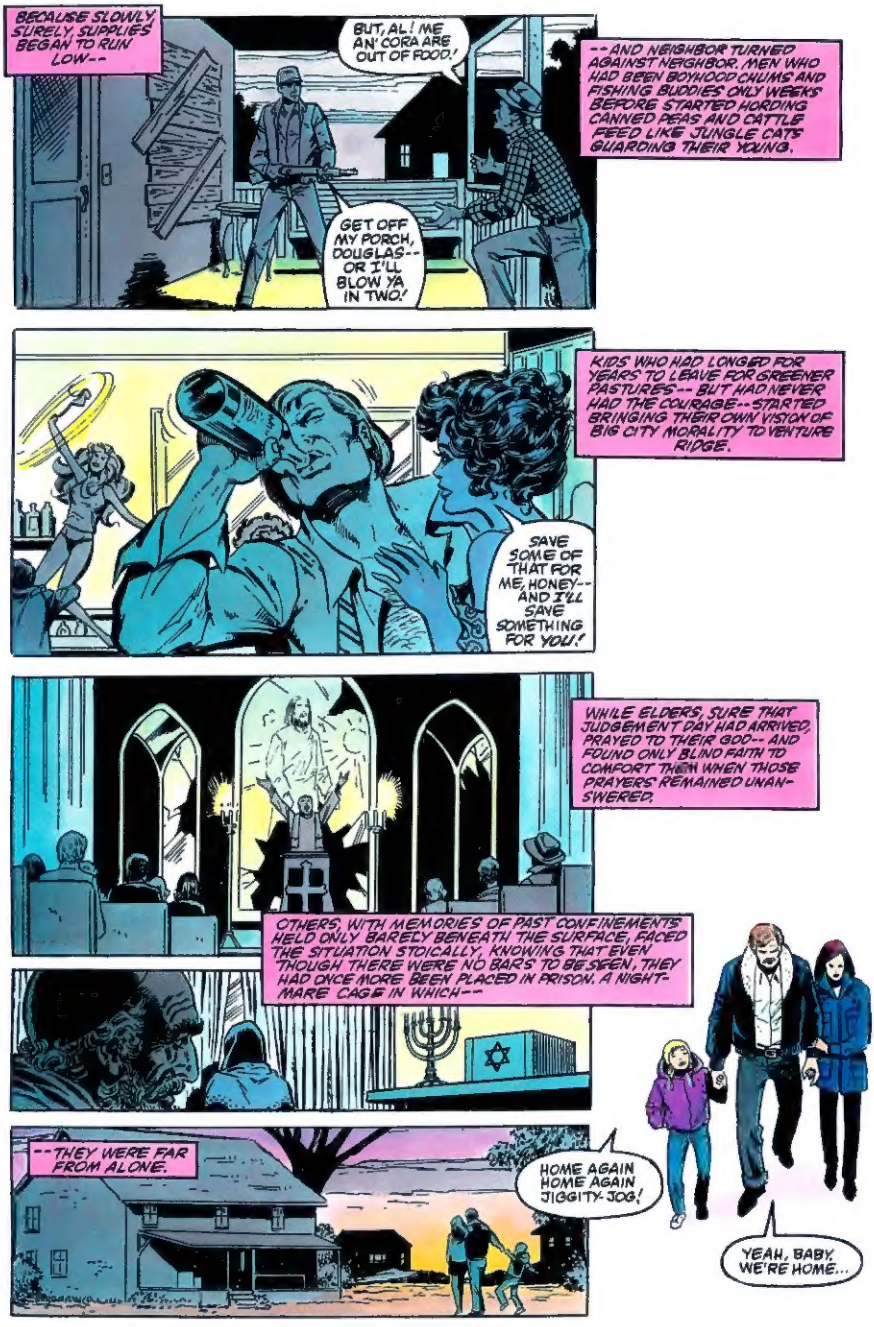

CHAPTER 1
MUTED DREGS OF SUNLIGHT PUSH THROUGH WINDOW GLASS CRACKED AND GRIMY... SORDID DUSK COME TO CALL.
COME TO TAUNT.
FOR EVEN IF THE SILENT MAN SITTING AT THE CLUTTERED DESK WERE TO LEAN FORWARD, FLIP THE SWITCH OF A NEARBY LAMP, THERE WOULD BE NO BRIGHTNESS TO CHASE THE SWELLING SHADOWS. HE HAS NO ELECTRICITY.
IF HE WERE TO LIFT THE RECEIVER IN FRONT OF HIM, CALL FOR REPAIRS, HIS EFFORTS WOULD BE FUTILE. HE HAS NO PHONE SERVICE.
AND EVEN IF HE WERE TO PRAY, THE PLEA WOULD ECHO FALSE AND HOLLOW IN THE CORNERS OF HIS SOUL. FOR HE ALSO HAS NO HOPE...
WE'RE GONNA DIE. ALL OF US.
AND THERE'S NOT A DAMN THING I CAN DO ABOUT IT.


HIS NAME IS JOSEPH EMBER--
-- AND FOR NEARLY A DECADE HE HAS PLAYED A GALLANT GAME, STANDING TOE-TO-TOE AGAINST FORCES OF INJUSTICE, THE CREEPING TIDE OF CRIME AND CORRUPTION.
BUT NOW THE RULES HAVE CHANGED. THE GAME IS OUT OF CONTROL. HE FINDS THAT HE MUST KEEP REMINDING HIMSELF, ALMOST CONSTANTLY, THAT HE IS AUTHORITY... HE IS LAW AND ORDER...
... HE IS THE SHERIFF OF VENTURE RIDGE.
HNH ?
HI, DADDY!


EVENIN', COWBOY. HOLLY-ANN AND I THOUGHT WE'D DROP BY TO WALK YOU HOME.
SO YA WOULDN'T GET LONESOME!
GEE, UH, THAT'S SWELL, DARLIN', BUT-- MARY, THE SUN'S ALMOST DOWN. THINGS COULD GET DANGEROUS--!
DON'T WORRY, DADDY, WE'LL PROTECT YA!
WELL NOW, THAT SURE TAKES A LOAD OFF MY MIND. THOUGH I STILL WISH YOUR MOM'D BE A LITTLE LESS ADVENTUROUS THESE DAYS.
THINGS CAN HAPPEN ANYWHERE "THESE DAYS," JOE.
WE MIGHT AS WELL FACE THEM TOGETHER.
SHERIFF EMBER DOESN'T REPLY--HE KNOWS HIS WIFE IS RIGHT. SO HE SETS HIS DAUGHTER DOWN, A SNEAKED TICKLE BRINGING A GIGGLE LIKE SILVER RAIN TO THE STILL EVENING AIR.
AND THEN HE SHRUGS INTO HIS DOWN UNIFORM JACKET, PROTECTION AGAINST TEMPERATURES UNNATURALLY CHILL FOR THIS TIME OF YEAR, AND STEPS WITH HIS FAMILY INTO THE DEATH OF A LONE WYOMING DAY...


...INTO STREETS THAT LOOK MORE LIKE POSTWAR BERLIN THAN THE AVENUES OF SLEEPY, SMALLTOWN AMERICA.
THE END IS NOW
HEY, LAWMAN! THAT'S SOME SWEET MAMA YA GOT THERE! WANNA TRADE 'ER FOR A BOTTLE O' THE GOOD STUFF?
JOE--!
DON'T PAY 'EM ANY MIND, SWEETHEART. THEY'RE NOTHIN'.
BUT I'M WORRIED, JOE, ABOUT HOLLY--
DON'T BE. I'LL PROTECT BOTH OF YOU. I ALWAYS HAVE.
I KNOW, JOE, BUT I CAN'T HELP REMEMBERING...
...WHEN WE DIDN'T NEED PROTECTION. NOT TO WALK DOWN THE STREETS OF OUR OWN TOWN. HOW LONG AGO WAS IT? A YEAR? FIVE? TEN...?
TWO MONTHS.
HOLLY-ANN EMBER, IN YOUTHFUL EXUBERANCE, KICKS A STONE AND FALLS INTO AN EASY, SKIPPING GAIT.
WHILE HER FATHER NARROWS HIS EYES, TIGHTENS HIS JAW.
IF IT WASN'T FOR THAT WALL. THAT GOD...DAMNED...WALL!
HE'S A SIMPLE MAN, JOE EMBER. TO HIS FRAME OF REFERENCE, THAT'S ALL IT COULD BE: A WALL. AN INVISIBLE WALL. THOUGH OTHER, MORE SOPHISTICATED OBSERVERS MIGHT CALL IT--

--A FORCE FIELD. BUT WHATEVER THE LABEL, IT HAD BEEN THERE ONE MORNING. JUST... BEEN THERE. UNBURNABLE, UNBREAKABLE, IMPENETRABLE.
TALLER THAN ANY COULD CLIMB; DEEPER THAN ANY COULD DIG.
AND WITH NO WAY IN AND NO WAY OUT, VENTURE RIDGE HAD BEEN CUT OFF--
--ITS OCCUPANTS TRAPPED LIKE BUGS IN A SEALED AND LIDLESS JAR.
AT FIRST, MAYOR HOPPEL TRIED TO KEEP THE PEACE, TELLING HIS CONSTITUENTS THAT THIS WAS A NATURAL PHENOMENON, THAT IT WOULD SOON GO AWAY.
BUT "SOON" STRETCHED TO DAYS; DAYS BEGAT WEEKS.
AND PEOPLE IN THE RIDGE GOT SCARED.
THEN, THEY GOT NASTY.!
KAREESH
FEAR BRED ANGER--AND ANGER, VIOLENCE.
MUH PA! D-DON'T HURT MUH PA!
AND THAT WAS ONLY THE BEGINNING...

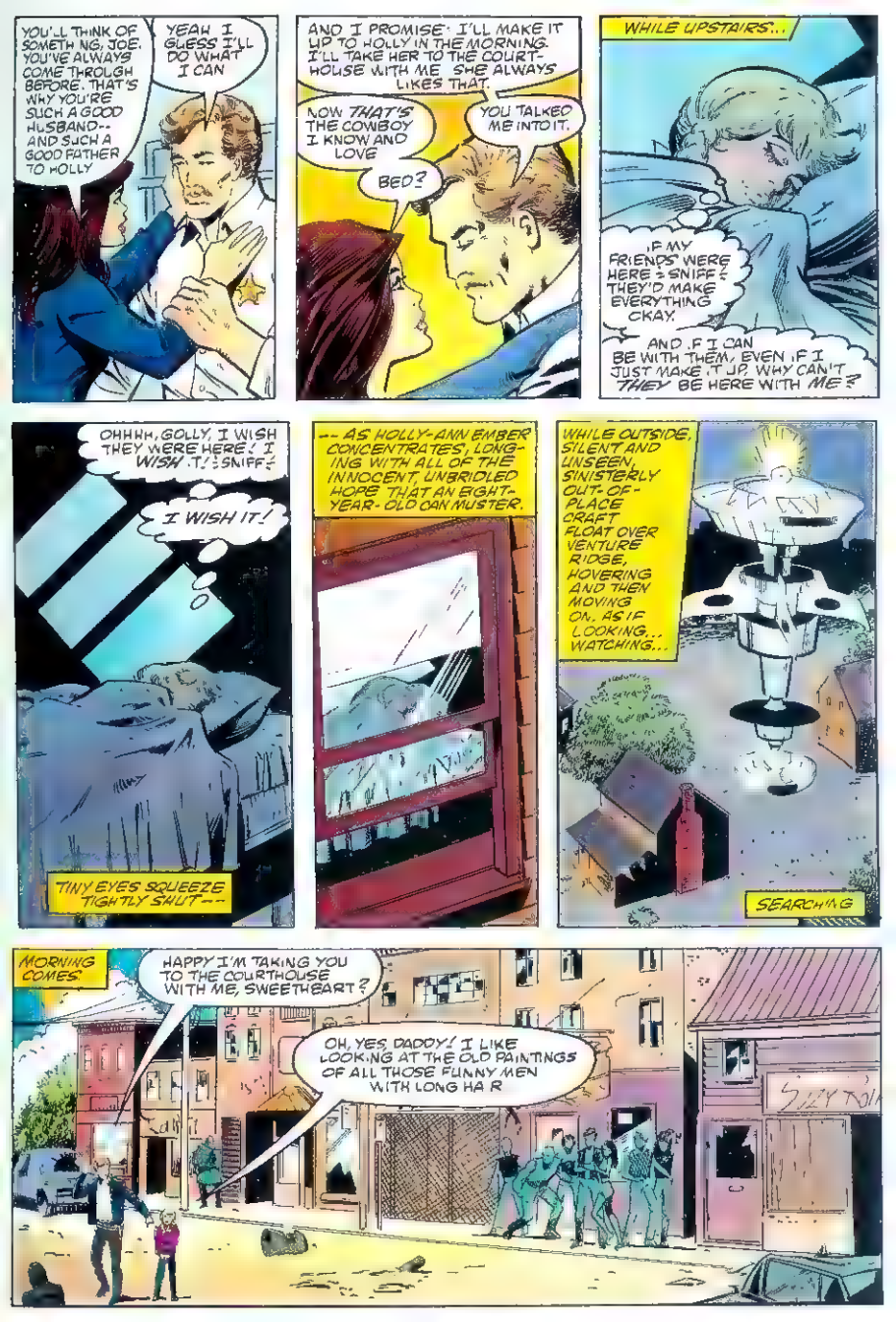

BECAUSE SLOWLY, SURELY, SUPPLIES BEGAN TO RUN LOW--
BUT, AL! ME AN' CORA ARE OUT OF FOOD!
GET OFF MY PORCH, DOUGLAS-- OR I'LL BLOW YA IN TWO!
--AND NEIGHBOR TURNED AGAINST NEIGHBOR. MEN WHO HAD BEEN BOYHOOD CHUMS AND FISHING BUDDIES ONLY WEEKS BEFORE STARTED HORDING CANNED PEAS AND CATTLE FEED LIKE JUNGLE CATS GUARDING THEIR YOUNG.
KIDS WHO HAD LONGED FOR YEARS TO LEAVE FOR GREENER PASTURES-- BUT HAD NEVER HAD THE COURAGE-- STARTED BRINGING THEIR OWN VISION OF BIG CITY MORALITY TO VENTURE RIDGE.
SAVE SOME OF THAT FOR ME, HONEY-- AND I'LL SAVE SOMETHING FOR YOU!
WHILE ELDERS, SURE THAT JUDGEMENT DAY HAD ARRIVED, PRAYED TO THEIR GOD-- AND FOUND ONLY BLIND FAITH TO COMFORT THEM WHEN THOSE PRAYERS REMAINED UNANSWERED.
OTHERS, WITH MEMORIES OF PAST CONFINEMENTS HELD ONLY BARELY BENEATH THE SURFACE, FACED THE SITUATION STOICALLY, KNOWING THAT EVEN THOUGH THERE WERE NO BARS TO BE SEEN, THEY HAD ONCE MORE BEEN PLACED IN PRISON. A NIGHTMARE CAGE IN WHICH--
--THEY WERE FAR FROM ALONE.
HOME AGAIN HOME AGAIN JIGGITY-JOG!
YEAH, BABY. WE'RE HOME...

MOMENTS LATER...
;BRRR! MUST BE FORTY DEGREES IN HERE. WE HAVE ANY KINDLING LEFT, HON?
YOU CAN USE THIS CORN FLAKES BOX, JOE-- I'M GOING TO EMPTY IT FOR SUPPER ANYWAY.
HOW 'BOUT YOU, HOLLY? DON'T HAVE ANYTHING ELSE WE CAN BURN, DO YOU? BOOKS, POSTERS, STUFF LIKE THAT...?
UH, NO, DADDY. N-NO POSTERS.
UM, I'LL BE DOWN IN A MINUTE.
I GOTTA DO SOME-THIN' UP-STAIRS.
OKAY, SWEET-HEART, BUT DON'T TAKE TOO LONG-- SUPPER'S ALMOST READY.
AND, AS A NEWBORN FIRE CRACKLES THE CHILL AWAY...
YOU'VE A RIGHT TO KNOW, MARY-- IT'S GETTING PRETTY GRIM OUT THERE. THE BOYS AND I PATROL WHEN WE CAN, BUT IT'S THE PUNKS AND THE SLUGS WHO OWN THE STREETS NOW. EVERYONE'S BETTER OFF STAYING BEHIND LOCKED DOORS WITH SHOTGUNS NEARBY.
WITHOUT POWER, WITH COMMUNICATIONS AND SUPPLIES CUT OFF, WELL ...
...I JUST DON'T KNOW WHAT'S GOING TO HAPPEN TO US.

THE DINNER IS A QUIET ONE--THE SOFT CRUNCH OF DRY CORN FLAKES WASHED DOWN WITH WELL WATER AUGMENTED ONLY BY SPARSE CONVERSATION.
AND EMBELLISHED BY FORCED SMILES AND STRAINED ASSURANCES.
AND LATER, AS A STILL-HUNGRY CHILD CLIMBS TO HER MOONLIT ROOM AND REMOVES A HIDDEN TREASURE FROM BENEATH HER MATTRESS...
I COULDN'T LET DADDY BURN MY SCRAPBOOK. I JUST COULDN'T!
ALL THESE PICTURES AN' STORIES I CUT FROM NEWSPAPERS AN' MAGAZINES, I'D NEVER BE ABLE TO GET 'EM BACK AGAIN.
AN' I'VE GOTTA READ 'EM, GOTTA STUDY 'EM. 'CAUSE SOME DAY--
--I'M GONNA BE A SUPER HERO, TOO!
YEAH, I COULD BE A CAT-LADY, LIKE TIGRA, ALL FAST AN' FURRY. MEOW!
OR MAYBE I'LL BE LIKE THE WASP, ABLE TO SHRINK DOWN TO TINY SIZE AN' FLY AROUND EVERYWHERE!
'COURSE, IF I WAS STORM, I COULD FLY AROUND AND MAKE THE WEATHER DO WHATEVER I WANTED!
AN' IF I WAS AS STRONG AS THE SHE-HULK, WELL, GOSH! I COULD DO ANYTHING!
WEARY EYELIDS CLOSE, AS NIGHTTIME FANCIES BECOME--

--ADVENTURES: SPANNING THE GALACTIC FRONTIERS OF HER MIND, HOLLY THE STARBIRD LEADS HER MIGHTY WOMAN WARRIORS INTO BATTLE!
FACING PERILS BEYOND THE IMAGINATION OF ANY MERE ADULT, THE FEMALE FIGHTER'S STRIVE BRAVELY, AT LAST TRIUMPHING OVER THE DREADED MOOGIE-BEARS OF PLANET ZAMM--
--MAKING THE UNIVERSE ONCE AGAIN SAFE FOR BASEBALL, FUZZY KITTENS AND ICE CREAM OF ALL RACES, CREEDS, AND FLAVORS
AND THROUGH IT ALL, THE SMILING HEROINES ARE BY HER SIDE, HELPING, CONFIDING, MAKING THINGS RIGHT.
THEY ARE HER FRIENDS AND, EVEN MORE WONDERFUL, HOLLY-ANN EMBER IS THEIR FRIEND.
SHE'S A HERO... SHE'S ONE OF THEM... SHE'S...

... CAUGHT!
HOLLY-ANN!
WHA--? D-D-DADDY!
I THOUGHT YOU SAID YOU'D GIVEN US EVERYTHING THAT WOULD BURN!
BUT, DADDY, THAT'S--
ENOUGH! YOU GET UNDER THOSE COVERS AND GO TO SLEEP, YOUNG LADY! RIGHT NOW!
DID YOU HAVE TO BE SO HARD ON HER, JOE? SHE DIDN'T MEAN ANY-THING.
I...I KNOW.
IT'S JUST THE PRES-SURE.
I GUESS IT'S MAKING ME A LITTLE CRAZY.
HOPPEL AND THE TOWN COUNCIL ARE MEETING AGAIN TOMORROW. THEY SAY THEY'D BE HAPPY TO GIVE WHOEVER'S TRAPPED US HERE WHATEVER THEY WANT--BUT THEY DON'T HAVE ANY IDEA WHO'S BEHIND IT, OR WHAT THEY'RE AFTER.
SO THEY'RE COUNTING ON ME TO COME UP WITH RECOM-MENDATIONS.
AND BABE, I HAVEN'T A CLUE.

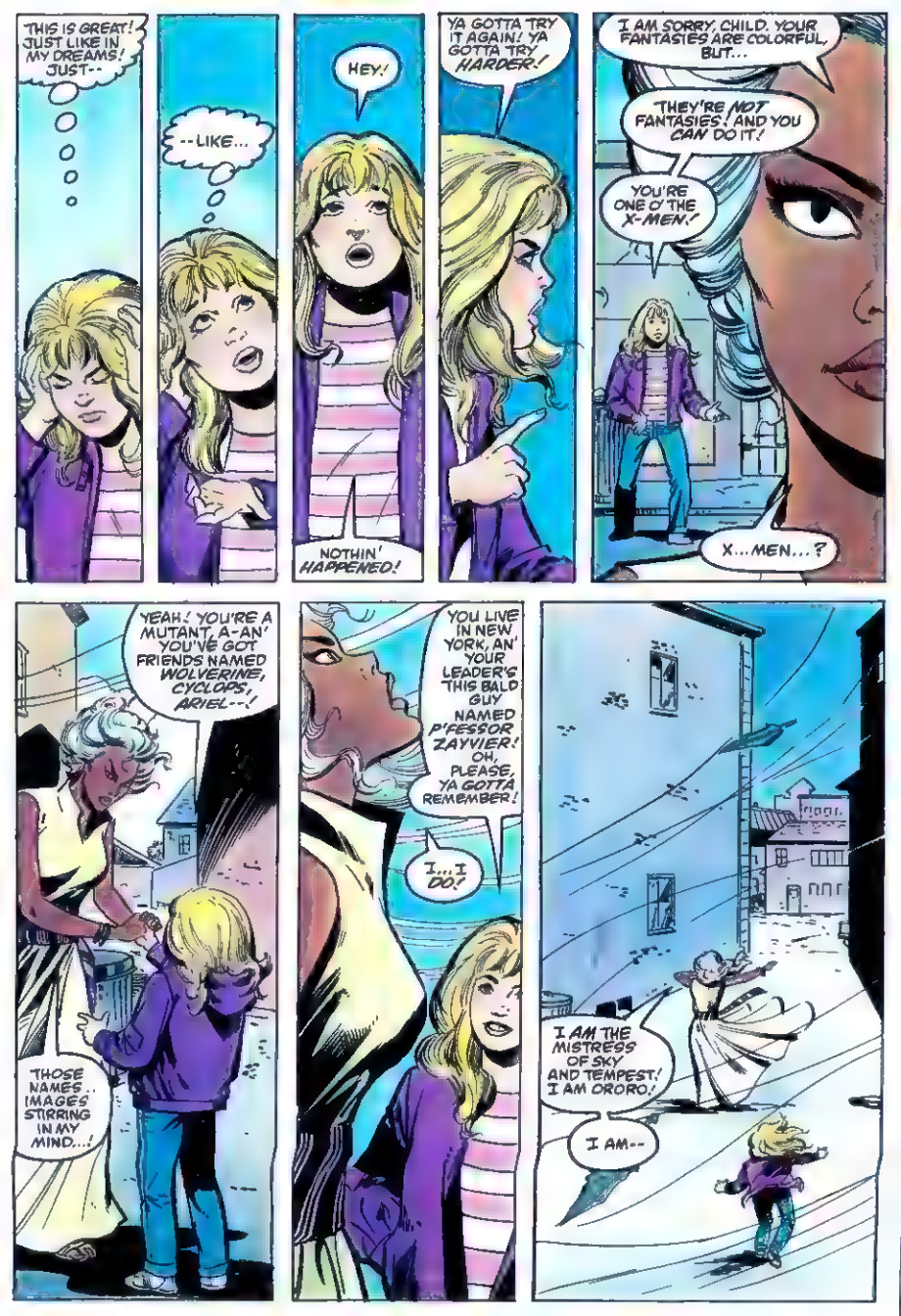

YOU'LL THINK OF SOMETH NG, JOE. YOU'VE ALWAYS COME THROUGH BEFORE. THAT'S WHY YOU'RE SUCH A GOOD HUSBAND-- AND SUCH A GOOD FATHER TO HOLLY
YEAH I GUESS I'LL DO WHAT I CAN
AND I PROMISE: I'LL MAKE IT UP TO HOLLY IN THE MORNING. I'LL TAKE HER TO THE COURT-HOUSE WITH ME SHE ALWAYS LIKES THAT.
NOW THAT'S THE COWBOY I KNOW AND LOVE
YOU TALKED ME INTO IT.
BED?
WHILE UPSTAIRS...
IF MY FRIENDS WERE HERE :SNIFF: THEY'D MAKE EVERYTHING OKAY.
AND IF I CAN BE WITH THEM, EVEN IF I JUST MAKE IT UP, WHY CAN'T THEY BE HERE WITH ME?
OHHHH, GOLLY, I WISH THEY WERE HERE! I WISH IT! :SNIFF:
I WISH IT!
TINY EYES SQUEEZE TIGHTLY SHUT---
-- AS HOLLY-ANN EMBER CONCENTRATES, LONG-ING WITH ALL OF THE INNOCENT, UNBRIDLED HOPE THAT AN EIGHT-YEAR-OLD CAN MUSTER.
WHILE OUTSIDE, SILENT AND UNSEEN, SINISTERLY OUT-OF-PLACE CRAFT FLOAT OVER VENTURE RIDGE, HOVERING AND THEN MOVING ON, AS IF LOOKING... WATCHING...
SEARCHING
MORNING COMES.
HAPPY I'M TAKING YOU TO THE COURTHOUSE WITH ME, SWEETHEART?
OH, YES, DADDY! I LIKE LOOKING AT THE OLD PAINTINGS OF ALL THOSE FUNNY MEN WITH LONG HA R

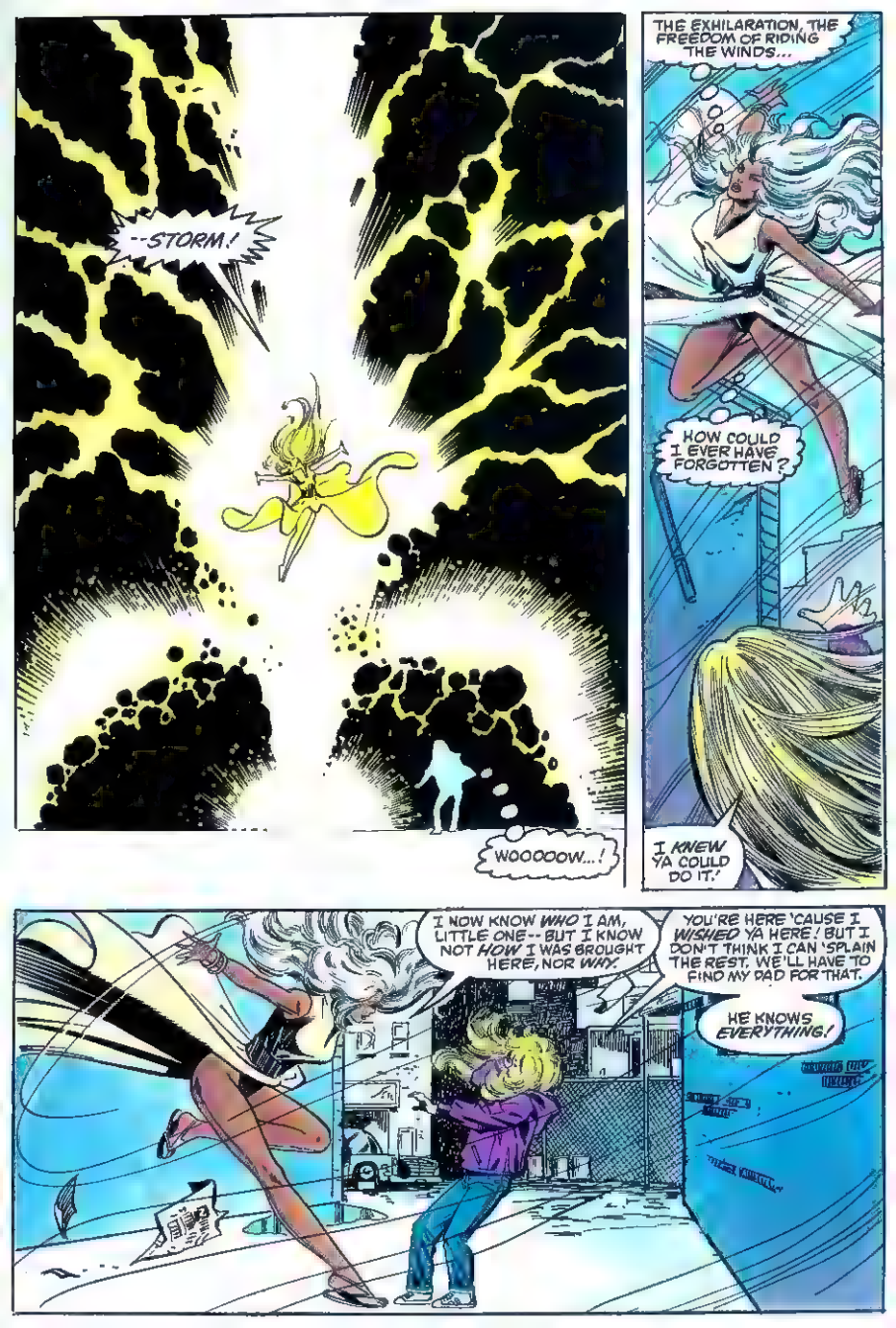
WELL, HEH-HEH, I DON'T KNOW HOW THE RIDGE'S FOUNDERS WOULD TAKE TO BEING CALLED "FUNNY MEN", BUT--
OMIGOSH!
DADDY, WAIT UP! TH-THAT, LADY--!
NOW, HOLLY, WE DON'T HAVE TIME TO DAWDLE. BESIDES, IT'S NOT SMART TALKIN' TO STRANGERS NOWADAYS.
BUT, DADDY, THAT'S NOT A STRANGER! THAT'S--
--STORM!
MOMENTS LATER. JOE EMBER SQUARES HIS SHOULDERS AND FACES THE VENTURE RIDGE TOWN COUNCIL--WHILE HIS DAUGHTER SQUIRMS IN AN OUTER OFFICE, LISTENING IMPATIENTLY TO TALES FROM THE PAST...
THEN THERE WAS THE GREAT WHEAT BLIGHT OF '56.
NOW THAT WAS REAL EXCITIN'! COUNCIL HAD TO DECIDE WHETHER OR NOT TO BURN THE WHOLE CROP!
VOTIN' WAS FIERCE, AN' WHEN THE DUST CLEARED--HUH?!
HOLLY-ANN EMBER! YOU COME BACK HERE!
NO! I--I CAN'T!

THAT LADY WAS STORM! I KNOW IT WAS!
MY WISH CAME TRUE!
DON'T KNOW WHY SHE LOOKED SO SKITTISH, OR WHY SHE DIDN'T SAY "HI" OR NOTHIN', BUT I'VE GOTTA FIND HER AND--
WELL, WELL, WHAT HAVE WE HERE?
LEMME GUESS, RANDY: LUNCH?
NO NEED TO BE CRUDE, J.T. 'SIDES, SHE WOULDN'T MAKE MORE'N A MOUTHFUL ANYWAY.
BUT THAT WARM-LOOKIN' COAT O' HERS, NOW THAT'S GOT POSSIBILITIES. WE COULD PROB'LY GET A WHOLE CASE O' BREW IN TRADE.
WHADYA SAY, LI'L LADY? WANNA HAND IT OVER NICE AN' PEACEFUL-LIKE?
NO!
GRAB 'ER!
AN' DON'T WASTE TIME BEIN' GENTLE!

DADDY WAS RIGHT! I-I NEVER SHOULDA LEFT THE COURTHOUSE!
IT WAS DUMB TO COME LOOKIN' FOR--
WHOOF!
THUMP
YOU!
WE GOT 'ER NOW, GUYS! THIS ALLEY'S A DEAD-END! THAT LITTLE DIP'S GONNA BE SORRY SHE EVER--!
LEAVE HER--
--ALONE!
WH-WHO THE HELL IS THAT?!
I DUNNO! SHE'S KINDA CREEPY--BUT WE GOT 'ER OUTNUMBERED 4-TO-1!
ALL WE GOTTA DO IS STOMP 'ER AN' TAKE THE KID'S COAT! THEN WE CAN HAVE A LITTLE FUN WITH...WITH...

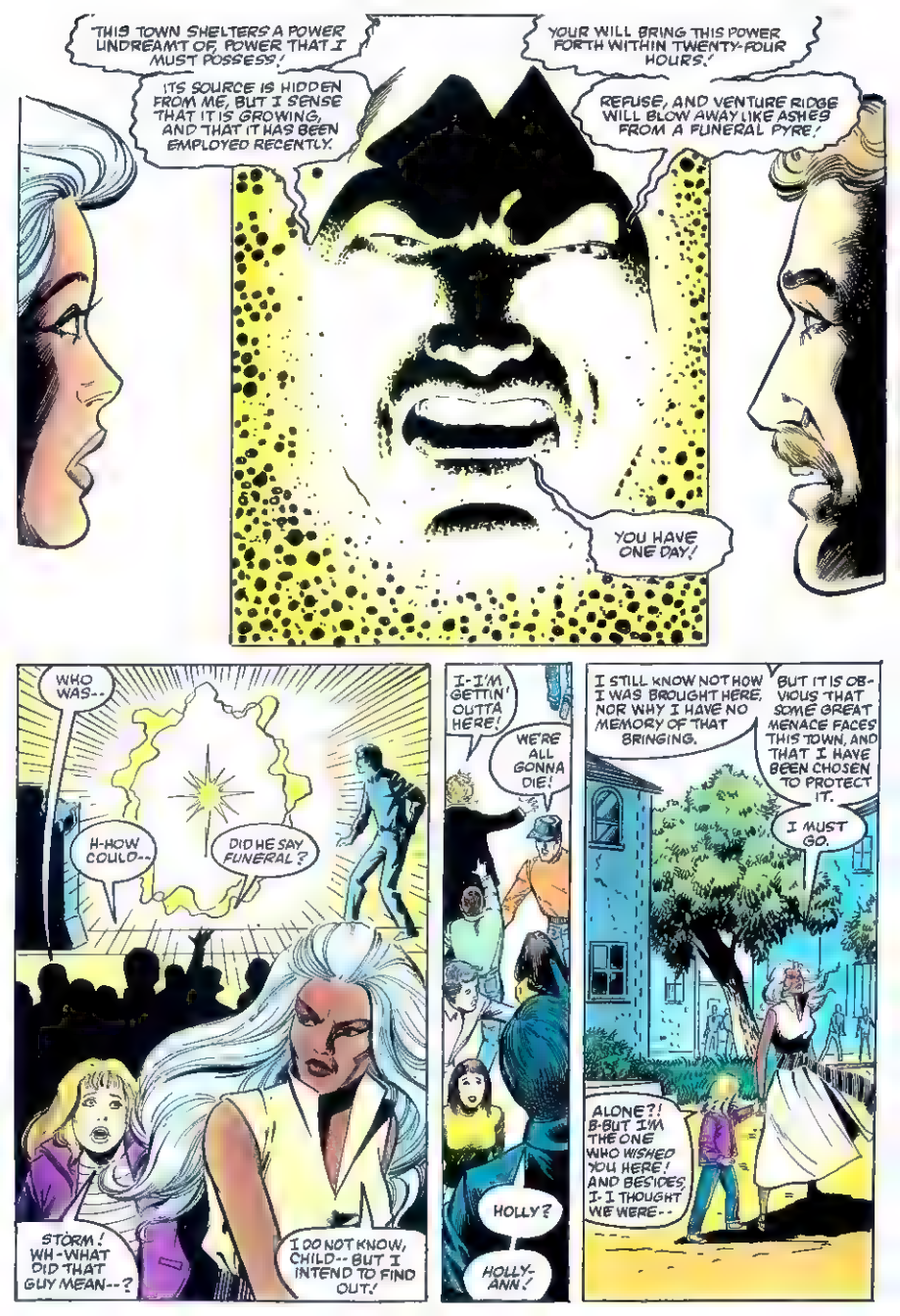
JESUS, HARLEY! L-LOOKIT HER EYES!
M-MAYBE WE BETTER STOMP 'ER SOME OTHER TIME!
YEAH! L-LIKE HOW 'BOUT A WEEK FROM NEXT TUESDAY!
YOU ARE SAFE, LITTLE ONE. NOW YOU MAY BE ABLE TO DO ME A FAVOR AS WELL.
PERHAPS YOU COULD TELL ME WHO I AM.
HUH? ARE YOU KIDDIN'?!
YOU'RE STORM!
YOU'RE A SUPER HERO, AN' YOU CAN MAKE THE WEATHER DO WHATEVER YOU WANT JUST BY TELLIN' IT!
I FIND THAT RATHER UNLIKELY. SURELY I WOULD KNOW IF I COULD DO SUCH.. EXTRAORDINARY THINGS.
BUT YOU CAN! JUST TRY IT!
WELL, ALL RIGHT. IF IT WILL PLEASE YOU.
THIS IS GONNA BE GOOD!
HEAR ME, O SKY AND CLOUDS! LET THERE BE GREAT RAIN! AND MIGHTY WIND! AND... UM...
... STUFF


THIS IS GREAT! JUST LIKE IN MY DREAMS! JUST--
--LIKE...
HEY!
NOTHIN' HAPPENED!
YA GOTTA TRY IT AGAIN! YA GOTTA TRY HARDER!
I AM SORRY, CHILD. YOUR FANTASIES ARE COLORFUL, BUT...
THEY'RE NOT FANTASIES! AND YOU CAN DO IT!
YOU'RE ONE O' THE X-MEN!
X...MEN...?
YEAH! YOU'RE A MUTANT, A-AN' YOU'VE GOT FRIENDS NAMED WOLVERINE, CYCLOPS, ARIEL--!
THOSE NAMES.. IMAGES STIRRING IN MY MIND...!
YOU LIVE IN NEW YORK, AN' YOUR LEADER'S THIS BALD GUY NAMED P'FESSOR ZAYVIER!
OH, PLEASE, YA GOTTA REMEMBER!
I...I DO!
I AM THE MISTRESS OF SKY AND TEMPEST! I AM ORORO!
I AM--


--STORM!
WOOOOOW...!
THE EXHILARATION, THE FREEDOM OF RIDING THE WINDS...
HOW COULD I EVER HAVE FORGOTTEN?
I KNEW YA COULD DO IT.'
I NOW KNOW WHO I AM, LITTLE ONE-- BUT I KNOW NOT HOW I WAS BROUGHT HERE, NOR WHY.
YOU'RE HERE 'CAUSE I WISHED YA HERE! BUT I DON'T THINK I CAN 'SPLAIN THE REST. WE'LL HAVE TO FIND MY DAD FOR THAT.
HE KNOWS EVERYTHING!

HOWEVER, IN A TOWN COUNCIL MEETING SOME BLOCKS AWAY,..
YOU DON'T KNOW NOTHIN', SHERIFF!
ALL I'M SAYING, EARL, IS THAT WE DON'T HAVE ENOUGH INFORMATION TO ACT ON. YOU WANT TO FIGHT? FINE. WHO YA GONNA FIGHT?
WE DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT'S GOIN' ON HERE, LET ALONE WHAT'S GONNA HAPPEN NEXT--!
SHERIFF! DEPUTY! G-GET YOUR GUNS! THERE'S A CRAZY WOMAN COMIN' INTO THE BUILDING! SHE'S GOT WILD EYES, A-AN' THIS WEIRD HAIR, A-AN'--
CHAPTER 2
NO GUNS!
SKRATCH
TH-TH-THAT'S HER!

THAT WOMAN SHOT A LIGHTNING BOLT RIGHT OUT OF HER FINGER-TIPS!
I SAW SOMETHING ABOUT HER ON "60 MINUTES" LAST MONTH! SHE'S A MUTANT FROM BACK EAST! SHE ISN'T EVEN HUMAN!
BUT SHE'S POWERFUL--MAYBE SHE CAN HELP US!
HELL, SHE'S PROBABLY BEHIND ALL THIS!
I SAY WE MAKE HER TELL US--
MAYBE GOD SENT HER TO--
WHAT IF SHE'S BAIT FOR--
PHWEEET
JUST HOLD YOUR HORSES! WE DON'T MAKE A MOVE 'TIL WE GET MORE INFORMATION!
HOLLY-ANN, WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT--
THE SHERIFF'S QUESTION STARTS STRONGLY, BUT ENDS ABRUPTLY AS THE AIR IN THE CENTER OF THE MEETING ROOM SUDDENLY SHIMMERS--
--AND THEN BREAKS!
WHAT THE--?!
A FACE! P-POPPIN' OUTTA THIN AIR!
BUT IT'S NOT REAL! I CAN SEE RIGHT THROUGH IT!
HEAR ME! I AM THE TIMEKEEPER! AND I BRING YOU--
--WARNING!


"THIS TOWN SHELTERS A POWER UNDREAMT OF, POWER THAT I MUST POSSESS!
ITS SOURCE IS HIDDEN FROM ME, BUT I SENSE THAT IT IS GROWING, AND THAT IT HAS BEEN EMPLOYED RECENTLY.
YOUR WILL BRING THIS POWER FORTH WITHIN TWENTY-FOUR HOURS.'
REFUSE, AND VENTURE RIDGE WILL BLOW AWAY LIKE ASHES FROM A FUNERAL PYRE.'
YOU HAVE ONE DAY.'
WHO WAS--
H-HOW COULD--
DID HE SAY FUNERAL?
STORM! WH-WHAT DID THAT GUY MEAN--?
I DO NOT KNOW, CHILD-- BUT I INTEND TO FIND OUT.'
I-I'M GETTIN' OUTTA HERE!
WE'RE ALL GONNA DIE!
HOLLY?
HOLLY-ANN!
I STILL KNOW NOT HOW I WAS BROUGHT HERE, NOR WHY I HAVE NO MEMORY OF THAT BRINGING.
BUT IT IS OBVIOUS THAT SOME GREAT MENACE FACES THIS TOWN, AND THAT I HAVE BEEN CHOSEN TO PROTECT IT.
I MUST GO.
ALONE?! B-BUT I'M THE ONE WHO WISHED YOU HERE! AND BESIDES, I-I THOUGHT WE WERE--

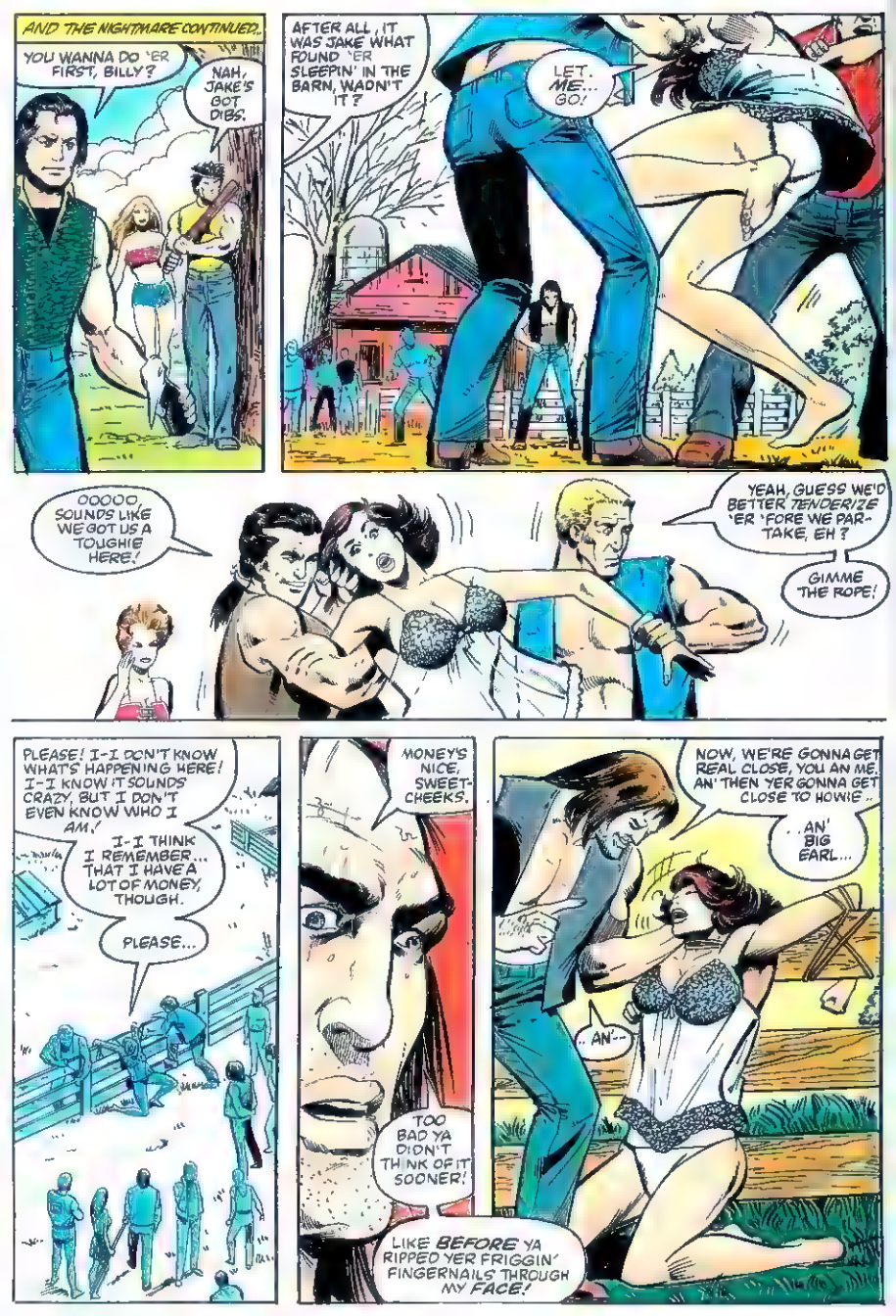
-- FRIENDS.
TAKE MY HAND.
WITH MOVEMENTS AS GENTLE AS A FLOWER UNFOLDING IN SPRING, STORM GESTURES.
THE UNSEEN WIND OBEYS, ITS SIGH TURNING TO A MOAN.
ITS BREEZE TO A GENTLE GALE.
UNTIL AT LAST TWO FORMS ARE PLUCKED FROM THE EARTH, ONE RISING WITH ACCUSTOMED GRACE
THE OTHER, NOT SO MUCH SO...
WHOOOOOOP!
HEY! MY HAT! MY--
-- GOD! TH-TH-THAT WOMAN IS FLOATING!
AFTER THESE LAST TWO MONTHS IN THE RIDGE, I THOUGHT NOTHIN' COULD SURPRISE ME! BUT FLYIN' GIRLS?!
A-AND HURRICANES IN WYOMING?!?
IN MOMENTS, THE UNNATURAL WIND WILL FADE. THE FUROR IT ENGENDERS WILL RAGE FOR HOURS...

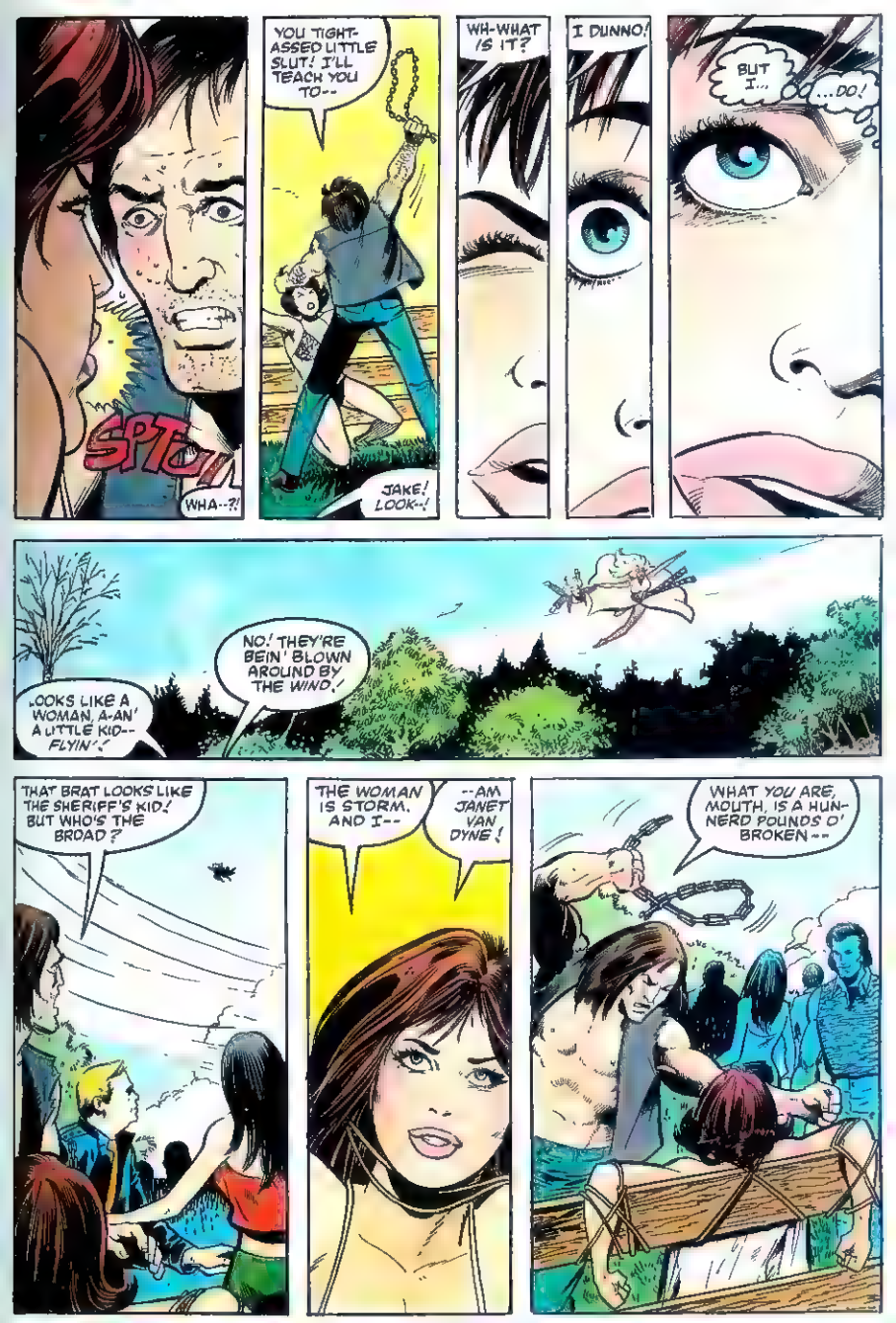
ONE OF THOSE HOURS, HOWEVER, IS PUT TO GOOD USE, AS AN AERIAL EXPLORATION OF THE CONTAINMENT SURROUNDING AND COVERING VENTURE RIDGE IS MADE.
THAT CONTAINMENT IS FOUND TO BE COMPLETE, UNBROKEN. AND EVENTUALLY, AT AN ABANDONED HOMESTEAD AT THE BARRIER'S EDGE...
AND THAT'S ABOUT ALL I CAN TELL YA 'BOUT WHAT'S BEEN GOIN' ON, STORM.
IT IS APPARENT THAT WHOEVER THREATENS YOUR TOWN HAS AWESOME FORCES AT HIS COMMAND. BUT WHAT IS WORSE, THE PEOPLE OF VENTURE RIDGE HAVE LOST HEART, FORSAKEN HOPE.
AND IF THEY HAVE ALREADY GIVEN UP, THERE IS LITTLE I CAN DO.
BUT ALL THEY NEED IS A HEROINE, SOMEONE TO SHOW 'EM THAT GOOD PEOPLE ARE STRONG, TOO!
ISN'T THERE SOMETHIN' YOU CAN DO?
PERHAPS, CHILD. I SUPPOSE THAT, AT THE VERY LEAST.
...I CAN TRY.
SAPPHIRE EYES RISE HEAVENWARD.
AND A BREEZE BEGINS TO STIR...
BLACK CLOUDS ROIL WHERE BEFORE THERE WERE NONE.
ELECTRICITY SPARKS, SCENTING THE AIR WITH OZONE.
MIGHTY TREES BOW BEFORE SLEDGEHAMMER WINDS!
AND ALL AT THE WILL OF THE WOMAN CALLED STORM.

I-I'VE READ ABOUT THIS DOZENS OF TIMES! BUT BEIN' RIGHT IN IT--!
GOSH, I-I'M A LITTLE SCARED!
BUT IT IS EXULTATION, NOT FEAR, THAT ETCHES ORORO'S FACE. AN INNER JOY AS SHE SUMMONS THE ELEMENTAL POWER OF NATURE ITSELF.
FOR SOME, IT IS POWER TO BE DREADED.
FOR ORORO, IT IS POWER TO BE GATHERED.
FOCUSED!
UNLEASHED!

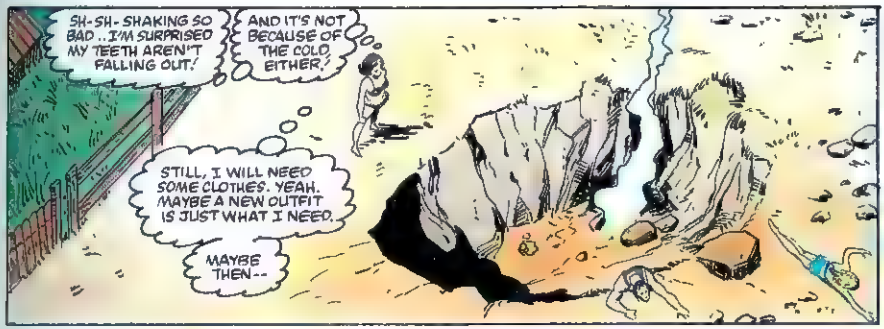
BUT, THIS TIME, TO SURPRISINGLY SMALL EFFECT...
I AM... UNUSED TO FAILURE.
BUT IT WOULD APPEAR THAT SOME THINGS ARE BEYOND EVEN MY POWER.
HEY, DON'T FEEL BAD! MAYBE THERE'S ANOTHER WAY!
I MEAN, I WISHED YOU HERE, DIDN'T I? SO MAYBE I WISHED OTHER PEOPLE HERE, TOO! MAYBE WE JUST GOTTA GO LOOK FOR 'EM!
KA-RRASH
THAT MAY NOT BE NECESSARY...
HI! EITHER OF YOU GUYS KNOW WHERE CIVILIZATION STARTS AROUND HERE? I'M SO HUNGRY I COULD EAT A COW--
--AND ORDER ANOTHER ONE TO GO!

GOSH! I-IT'S SHE-HULK!
STAND BACK, WOMAN!
IF YOU DARE HARM THIS CHILD--!
HEY, LIGHTEN UP! I'M ONE OF THE GOOD GUYS!
OR MAYBE YOUR MEMORY IS STILL AS SCRAMBLED AS MINE WAS BEFORE I SAW MY REFLECTION IN THAT STREAM BACK THERE.
I MEAN, WHEN YOU'RE AS BIG AND GREEN AS I AM, IT'S SORT OF HARD TO FORGET WHO YOU ARE FOR LONG,
I STILL DON'T KNOW HOW I GOT HERE, THOUGH. ONE MINUTE I'M ON MY WAY TO THE AVENGERS' MANSION IN NEW YORK, AND THEN... POOF!
I AM STORM, AND MY STORY IS SIMILAR. ALL I HAVE DISCOVERED IS THAT THE PEOPLE HERE ARE IN DANGER, AND THEY NEED OUR HELP.
WHOA NOW, HOLD ON A MINUTE! THE ONLY "OUR" I BELONG TO IS THE AVENGERS!
I'M GONNA CHECK THINGS OUT MYSELF, AND IF I COME UP WITH ANYTHING INTERESTING--
-I'LL LET YOU KNOW.
SHE IS QUITE INDEPENDENT. SHE MAY BE OF HELP LATER.
BUT NOW--
--WE MUST SEARCH FOR OTHERS!
I-I GUESS I SHOULD BE GETTING USED TO THIS. BUT, GEE--
--WE'RE SOOOO HIGH UP!
ELSEWHERE...
SHE WAS HAVING A NIGHTMARE.
SHE WOKE UP.

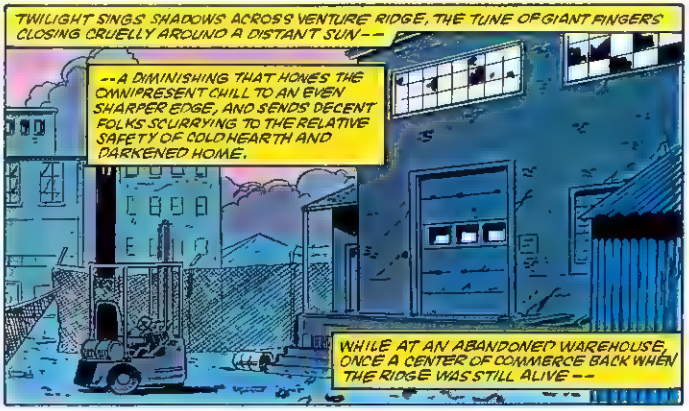

AND THE NIGHTMARE CONTINUED..
YOU WANNA DO 'ER FIRST, BILLY?
NAH, JAKE'S GOT DIBS.
AFTER ALL, IT WAS JAKE WHAT FOUND 'ER SLEEPIN' IN THE BARN, WADN'T IT?
LET ME... GO!
OOOOO SOUNDS LIKE WE GOT US A TOUGHIE HERE!
YEAH, GUESS WE'D BETTER TENDERIZE 'ER 'FORE WE PARTAKE, EH?
GIMME THE ROPE!
PLEASE! I-I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S HAPPENING HERE! I-I KNOW IT SOUNDS CRAZY, BUT I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHO I AM!
I-I THINK I REMEMBER... THAT I HAVE A LOT OF MONEY, THOUGH.
PLEASE...
MONEY'S NICE, SWEETCHEEKS.
TOO BAD YA DIDN'T THINK OF IT SOONER!
LIKE BEFORE YA RIPPED YER FRIGGIN' FINGERNAILS THROUGH MY FACE!
NOW, WE'RE GONNA GET REAL CLOSE, YOU AN ME, AN' THEN YER GONNA GET CLOSE TO HOWIE..
..AN' BIG EARL...
..AN'--


SPT!
WHA--?!
YOU TIGHT-ASSED LITTLE SLUT! I'LL TEACH YOU TO--
JAKE! LOOK--!
WH-WHAT IS IT?
I DUNNO!
BUT I...
...DO!
LOOKS LIKE A WOMAN, A-AN' A LITTLE KID-- FLYIN'!
NO! THEY'RE BEIN' BLOWN AROUND BY THE WIND!
THAT BRAT LOOKS LIKE THE SHERIFF'S KID! BUT WHO'S THE BROAD?
THE WOMAN IS STORM, AND I--
--AM JANET VAN DYNE!
WHAT YOU ARE, MOUTH, IS A HUN-NERD POUNDS O' BROKEN--

KRUNKSH
HUH?!
SH-SHE DISAPPEARED!
NO, ACTUALLY, I SHRUNK! I GUESS MAYBE YOU DIDN'T HEAR ME. I'M JANET VAN DYNE.
THE WASP.
AND MISTER, THE WASP..
--DOESN'T TAKE ABUSE--
--FROM ANYBODY!
FRAKAKOWWM


SH-SH- SHAKING SO BAD..I'M SURPRISED MY TEETH AREN'T FALLING OUT!
AND IT'S NOT BECAUSE OF THE COLD, EITHER.
STILL, I WILL NEED SOME CLOTHES. YEAH. MAYBE A NEW OUTFIT IS JUST WHAT I NEED.
MAYBE THEN--

--I WON'T FEEL SO MUCH LIKE VOMITING...


TWILIGHT SINGS SHADOWS ACROSS VENTURE RIDGE, THE TUNE OF GIANT FINGERS CLOSING CRUELLY AROUND A DISTANT SUN--
--A DIMINISHING THAT HONES THE OMNIPRESENT CHILL TO AN EVEN SHARPER EDGE, AND SENDS DECENT FOLKS SCURRYING TO THE RELATIVE SAFETY OF COLD HEARTH AND DARKENED HOME.
WHILE AT AN ABANDONED WAREHOUSE, ONCE A CENTER OF COMMERCE BACK WHEN THE RIDGE WAS STILL ALIVE--

--FERAL EYES PEER THROUGH THE JAGGED SPACE OF A BROKEN WINDOW.

EYES THAT BELONG TO A WOMAN.
A WOMAN WITH--

FUR! MY GOD, I'M COVERED WITH FUR!
WHAT THE HELL AM I?

COME TO THINK OF IT, WHO AM I?
AND WHERE AM I?
I-I DON'T REMEMBER A THING!
IS THIS WHERE I LIVE? MAYBE IF I LOOK AROUND, FIND SOMETHING TO REMIND ME--
--THERE! SOMETHING CATCHING THE LIGHT! MAYBE IT'S--
--NUTS. JUST PART OF AN OLD MIRROR. CAN'T TELL ANYTHING FROM THIS BUT--
--OH, LORD! M-MY EYES!
THEY'RE CAT'S EYES!
B-BUT I'M A WOMAN,
AREN'T I.. ?
I-I MEAN, I DO HAVE EYES LIKE A CAT, AND I AM COVERED WITH FUR.
OH, NO! WH-WHAT IF--
--WHEW! NO TAIL AT LEAST!
I'M SCARED. PART OF ME JUST WANTS TO CRAWL UNDER SOMETHING AND HIDE. BUT I WON'T LEARN ANYTHING THAT WAY.
NO, I'VE GOT TO EXPLORE. GOT TO GO OUTSIDE AND... WELL...
...DAMMIT, I WISH I COULD THINK OF ANOTHER WORD BESIDES "PROWL!"

SENSES FLARE, AS A SOFT BLUR OF BLACK AND ORANGE TAKES TO THE SHADED SKYLINE --
--UNTIL A QUEST FOR ANSWERS SLOWLY GIVES WAY TO A HEADIER, MORE FUNDAMENTAL URGE.
--FELINE INSTINCTS REVELING IN THE NIMBLE PROGRESS FROM ROOF TO ROOF--
HEY, I'M HUNGRY!
NOSTRILS DILATE; A SCENT IS CAUGHT--A SCRAP OF BACON RIND OVERLOOKED BY EVEN THE STARVING RESIDENTS OF VENTURE RIDGE.
THE FURRED WOMAN FOLLOWS IT TO AN ALLEY LITTERED WITH REFUSE AND GARBAGE AND THERE--
POUNCES!
HOWEVER...
FOOTSTEPS!
SOMEONE COMING!
THEY WANT MY FOOD!
BUT THEY'RE NOT GOING TO GET IT!
HOLLY! GET BEHIND ME!
HER GESTURE IS SIMPLE, PURE. AND IN RESPONSE, A TORNADO WIND RISES...
WHRAKCH
..AND CASUALLY BATS THE QUARTER-TON ENGINE BLOCK INTO A SOLID STONE WALL!

SHE'S POWERFUL--AND DANGEROUS! BETTER ATTACK BEFORE SHE GETS A CHANCE TO DO THAT TO ME!
THE WOMAN IS CROUCHING! ABOUT TO STRIKE! MUST STOP HER BEFORE--
WAITAMINIT.
EASE UP TIGRA! I DIDN'T FOLLOW STORM ALL THIS WAY JUST TO WATCH YOU RIP HER LUNGS OUT!
OH, I GET IT-- YOU'RE JUST LIKE I WAS! OKAY, LET ME JOG YOUR MEMORY YOU'RE TIGRA, AND YOU'RE AN AVENGER! WELL, A SOME TIME AVENGER, BUT THAT'S OKAY.
"STORM"? "T-TIGRA"?
YOU MUST REMEMBER, TIGRA! WE NEED YOUR HELP!
GOLLY! THE WASP, AND TIGRA, TOO!
Y'KNOW, I AM STARTING TO REMEMBER. I DO KNOW WHO I AM!
AND BOY, DO I FEEL LIKE A NERD.
WHAT THE HECK'S GOING ON HERE?
THAT'S WHAT I'D LIKE TO KNOW!
INDEED WE MUST CONFER, COMPARE EXPERIENCES. WE WILL NEED A PLACE TO REGROUP!
HEY, I KNOW! LET'S GO TO MY HOUSE!
AND FOR HOLLY-ANN EMBER, THE AFFIRMATIVE NOD IS A DREAM COME TRUE.

CHAPTER 3
MEANWHILE: FAR AWAY, AT THE EDGE OF THE IMPRISONING BARRIER, GREAT GREEN FISTS PUMMEL BLANKNESS AS THE SHE-HULK RAINS BLOW AFTER BLOW ON THE INVISIBLE WALL.
SHE CONCENTRATES, BUILDING ANGER, REFUSING TO BELIEVE THAT ANYTHING ON THIS PLANET COULD LONG STAND AGAINST THE FULL FORCE OF HER MIGHTY ARMS. IF LEFT TO HERSELF HER BRUTAL ATTACK WOULD UNDOUBTEDLY LAST FAR INTO THE NIGHT
YES
IF LEFT TO HERSELF...
FREEZE!
AWWW, CRIPES! INTERFERENCE FROM THE LOCAL YAHOOS IS NOT WHAT I NEED RIGHT NOW!
TURN AROUND SLOW, LADY, REAL SLOW-- OR WE'LL TEAR YOU APART!

YOU WILL, HUH? YOU AND WHAT--
--ARMY?
OH
THAT ARMY.
THIS MUST BE THE "TROUBLE" STORM WAS TALKING ABOUT! BUT AT THE MOMENT, I'M IN THE MOOD FOR A LITTLE TROUBLE!
ESPECIALLY SINCE COSTUMED GOONS TEND TO BREAK A WHOLE LOT EASIER THAN FORCE FIELDS!
THRAK

SMASH!
WHOA! THESE GUYS AREN'T JUST BRAINLESS MUSCLE AFTER ALL! THEY'VE GOT SOME HEAVY HIGH-TECH ON THEIR SIDE!
MAYBE I SHOULD TAKE STORM UP ON HER OFFER TO BAND TOGETHER!
LEASTWAYS UNTIL I CAN FIND OUT THE EXTENT OF THE PROBLEM!
SO, I'LL JUST BASH MYSELF A LITTLE SHORTCUT THROUGH THIS SEA OF SPANDEX--
--AND THANK PROVIDENCE THEY DON'T HAVE ANYTHING POWERFUL ENOUGH TO STOP THE SHE-HUL--
KRRASHHOW

THE FOCUSING UNIT WORKED PERFECTLY. THE MASTER WILL BE PLEASED.
BRING HER.
UNKIND HANDS PULL AT EMERALD FLESH---
--DRAGGING THE UNCONSCIOUS HEROINE TO A TRAP DOOR THAT OPENS INTO THE VERY GROUND NEARBY...
AND SOON, A HALF-MILE BELOW VENTURE RIDGE, IN AN INSTALLATION AS LARGE AND MULTIFACETED AS THE BESIEGED CITY ITSELF---
--THE HUM OF NUCLEAR REACTORS MINGLES WITH THE CADENCED STAMP OF HARD-SOLED BOOTS...
...AND WITH AN ANNOUNCEMENT BOTH FORMAL AND PROUD.
SIR! WE HAVE CAPTURED ONE OF THE INFILTRATORS!
WHY DON'T YOU HAVE HER BROUGHT HERE, TI? IT MIGHT PROVE...AMUSING.

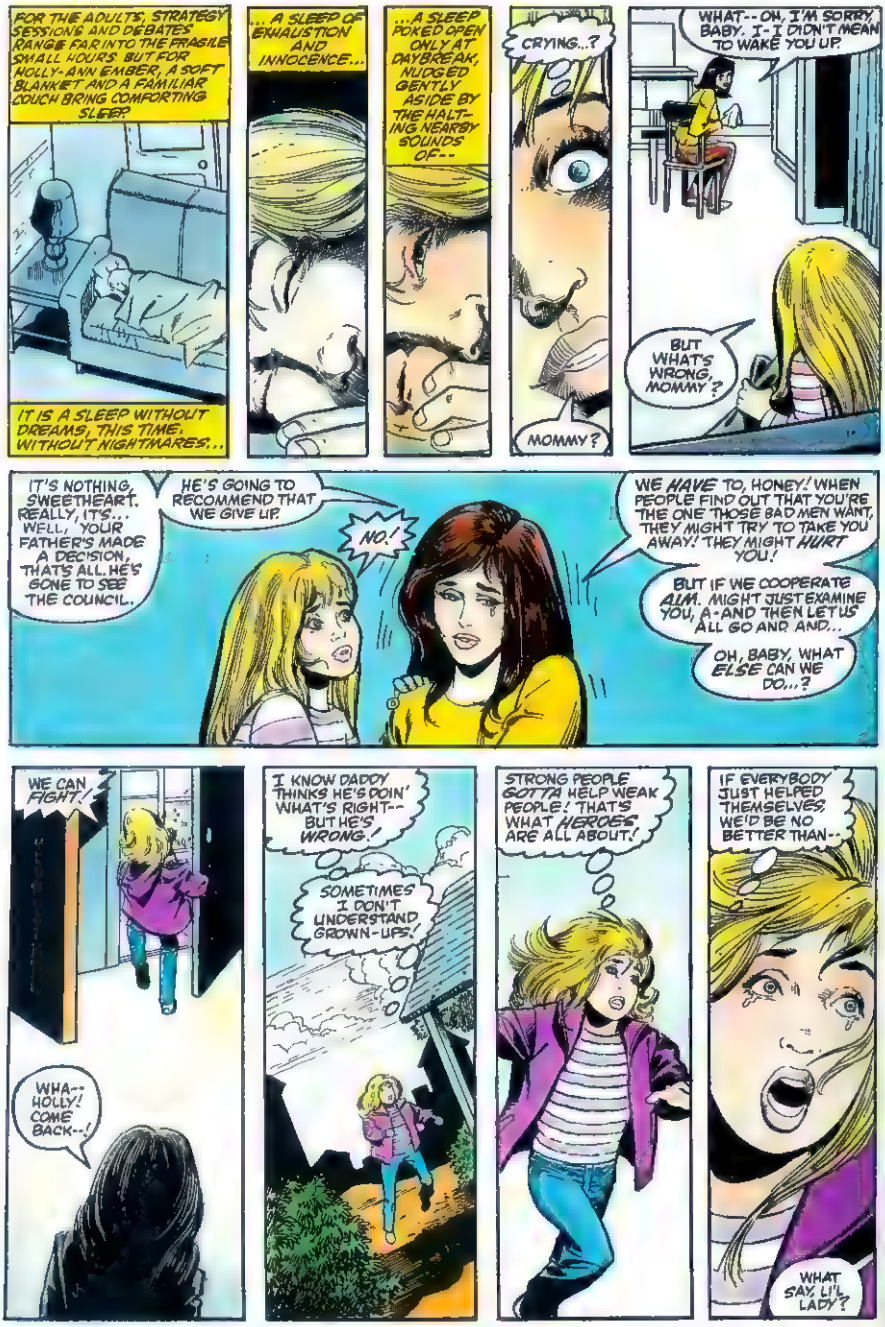
I HAVE ALREADY ANTICIPATED YOUR WISHES, MY LOVE.
WELCOME, SHE-HULK. I AM THE TIMEKEEPER, AND THIS IS MY DOMAIN.
I RUN THIS COMPLEX FOR A.I.M.--ADVANCED IDEA MECHANICS--AND EVERYTHING IN IT, INCLUDING YOURSELF, IS SUBJECT TO MY COMMAND.
I DOUBT IT
EVEN IF YOU WERE TO GET PAST ME, WHICH IS UNLIKELY, THIS COMPOUND IS FORTIFIED BEYOND IMAGINING.
GO AHEAD, "TIMEKEEPER", STRUT WHILE YOU CAN!
YOU SEE, WE'VE DONE WEAPONS' RESEARCH HERE FOR DECADES, MOSTLY DEALING WITH RADIATION ENERGIES.
THOUGH RECENTLY WE'VE DETECTED A POWER SOURCE IN THE VILLAGE ABOVE, ONE THAT DWARFS ANYTHING WE HAVE HERE.
YOU ARE NOT THAT SOURCE. BUT, POSSIBLY, YOU MAY BE ABLE TO LEAD US TO IT.
SHALL I ASK HER, DARLING? NICELY... WOMAN-TO-WOMAN?
HMMM, YES. WOULD YOU LIKE THAT, SHE-HULK?
WOULD YOU PERHAPS... ENJOY IT?
'CAUSE WHEN I'VE GOTTEN THE STRENGTH BACK TO BUST OUT OF THESE SHACKLES, I'M GONNA WIND YOUR CLOCK FOR GOOD!
MISTER, NOT ONLY DO YOU HAVE NERVE--

--BUT YOU'VE JUST STRUCK ONE!
WHRRAKASH
BLIP
BLIP
BLIP
THE FOCUSING MECHANISM IS OPERATIONAL, DARLING?
NATU-RALLY.
GOOD.
KAWHAM
TAP
YOU...Y-YOU KNOCKED ME DOWN.'
MM-HM.
THANKS TO ONE OF TI'S LITTLE SUCCESSES.
IT'S CALLED "BROADCAST POWER." SHALL I GIVE YOU A...
... FURTHER DEMONSTRATION?

SOON, ABOVE GROUND, AT THE PICKED-OVER PORCH OF # 14 MARIPOSA WAY, A WORK-WEARY JOE BAGER COMES---
--HOME.
DADDY! DADDY! THEY'RE HERE! I TOLD YA THEY'D COME! I WISHED 'EM!
HUH?
I-I THINK YOU'D BETTER LOOK IN THE DEN, JOE.
WHAT THE--?
SEE, DADDY? MY FRIENDS ARE ALL HERE! WE'RE GONNA BE OKAY!
SOMEBODY'D BETTER TELL ME WHAT'S GOIN' ON!
FAST!
AND YOU'D BETTER GET YOUR HAND AWAY FROM THAT GUN BUTT, SHERIFF--FASTER!
I'M THE WASP!
AND I'M TIGRA, TIGER!
WHILE I AM STORM, OF THE X-MEN.
THEY'RE FOR REAL, JOE. THEY'VE GOT INCREDIBLE POWERS.
I'VE SEEN THEM.

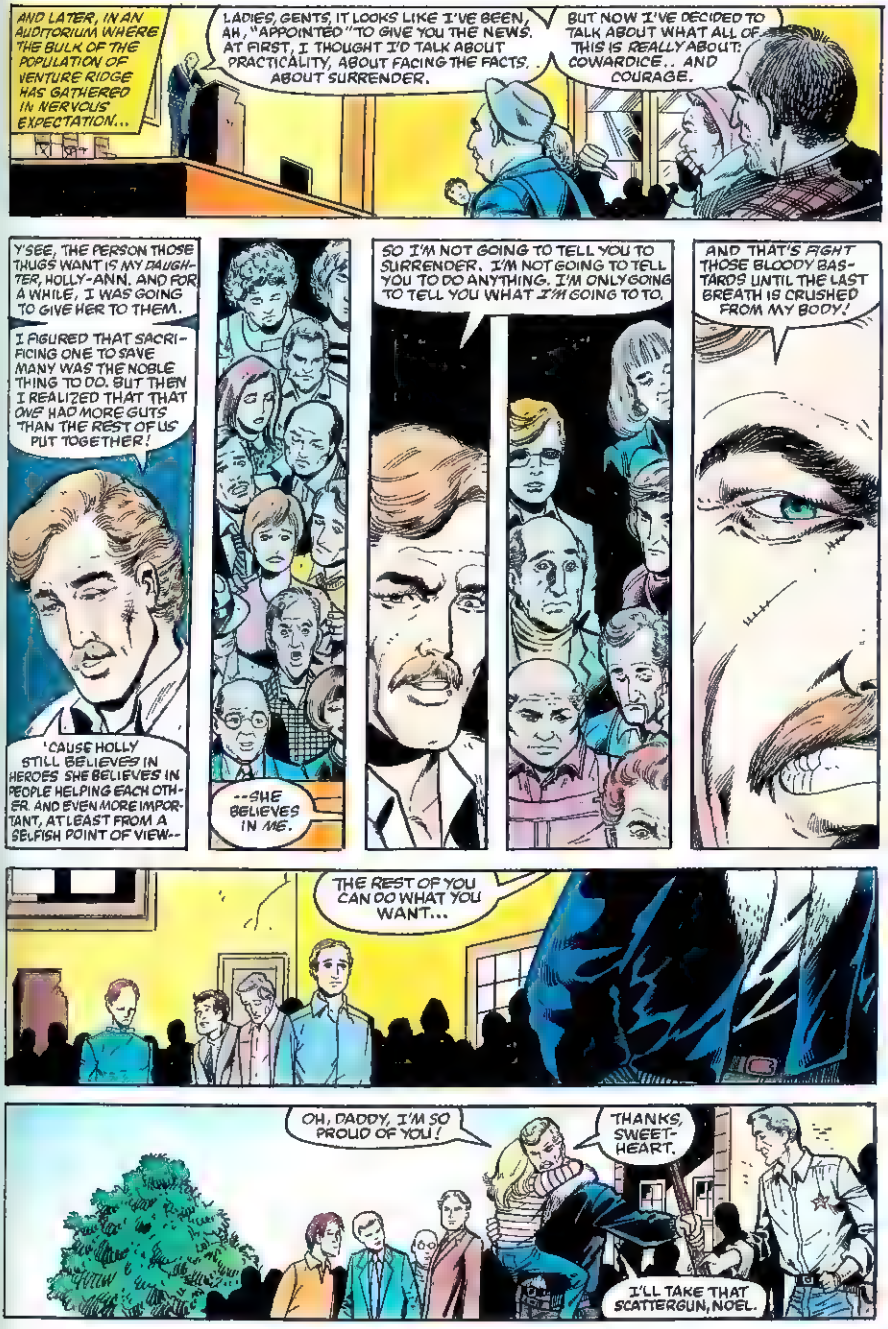
GRAVE DANGER FACES THIS COMMUNITY. WE ARE HERE TO HELP.
LOOK, I DON'T HOW YOU FOLKS GOT HERE, BUT I CAN USE EVERY BIT OF HELP I CAN GET.
AND YOU'RE NOT THE ONLY ONE! TROUBLE COMIN' UP THE SIDEWALK, GUYS! IN A WHEELBARROW!
WHAT?!
SORRY TO BOTHER YOU, SHERIFF-- I KNOW YOU LIKE US DEPUTIES TO HAVE INITIATIVE, BUT EVEN IN THESE DAYS, FINDIN' A GREEN-SKINNED WOMAN DUMPED IN A GARBAGE CAN IS--
SHE-HULK!
GOOD LORD!
A-ANYBODY GOT AN :KOFF: ASPIRIN ...?
OH, MY GOD!
HELP ME GET HER INTO THE HOUSE!
YOU BOYS GO ON HOME. I'LL TAKE IT FROM HERE.
OKAY, SHERIFF.
TAKE IT EASY, JEN. DON'T TRY TO TALK!
I :K-KOFF: HAVE TO! W-WE'RE UP AGAINST..A.I.M.! THEY'VE GOT RESEARCH FACILITIES... NUCLEAR STUFF... U-UNDER THE TOWN!
A-AND THEY'RE USING.. SOMETHING CALLED.. "BROADCAST POWER" ENERGY THEY CAN TRANSMIT DIRECTLY TO THEIR SOLDIERS!
M-MAKES THOSE SUCKERS :AGH: TOUGHER'N NAILS...!

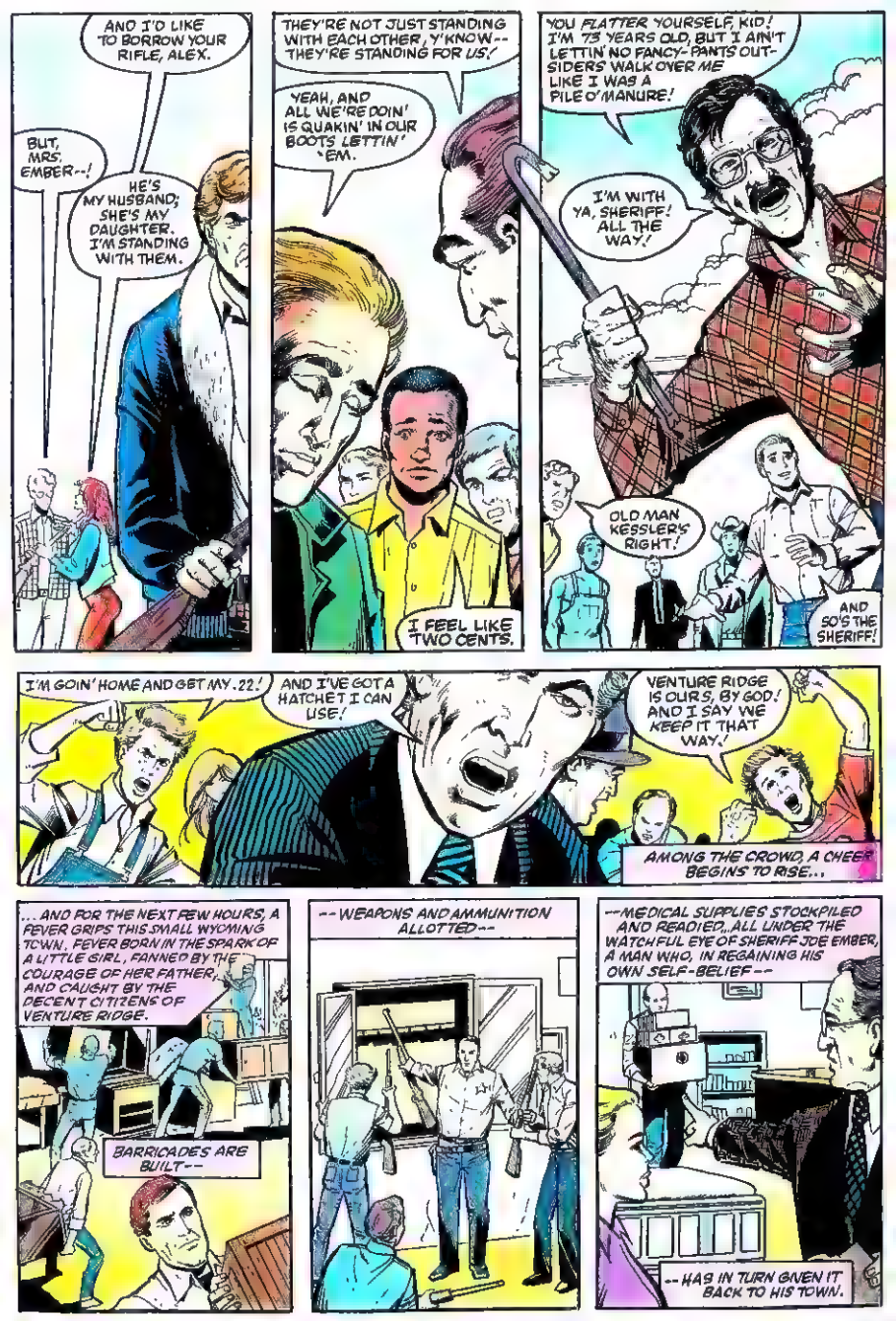
THEY KEPT ASKIN'... 'BOUT SOME K.N.D.A... SUPER POWER SOURCE :KOFF: HERE IN TOWN. A-AN' THEY KEPT HITTIN' ME...
A-AN HITTIN' ME...
S-SO I TOL' 'EM... JUST WHERE THEY COULD :KOFF: STICK THEIR QUESTIONS :HEH:...
THAT DOES IT! IF THESE "A.I.M." CHARACTERS CAN STOMP ONE OF YOU SUPER-TYPES NEARLY TO DEATH, THERE'S NO WAY SIMPLE FARMERS AND MERCHANTS CAN STAND UP TO THEM!
IT'S OBVIOUS WE'LL HAVE TO GIVE IN TO THESE ANIMALS, BEFORE--
SHERIFF, THERE'S ANOTHER FACTOR YOU'D BETTER TAKE INTO CONSIDERATION. I THINK THERE'S A GOOD CHANCE THAT THE POWER SOURCE A.I.M. IS LOOKING FOR, THE CAUSE FOR THIS WHOLE SITUATION --
--IS YOUR DAUGHTER!
HUH?!
NOW I KNOW YOU'RE CRAZY!
SHERIFF, PLEASE, LOOK AT THE FACTS:
A FEW HOURS AGO, THE FOUR OF US WERE IN SUCH DIVERSE PLACES AS NEW YORK AND LOS ANGELES. THEN "BANG"-- SUDDENLY WE'RE ALL AMNESIACS IN THE MIDDLE OF WYOMING!
AND FOR NO OTHER REASON THAT WE KNOW OF THAN A LITTLE GIRL WISHING US HERE, LIKE SHE'D RUBBED SOME SORT OF MENTAL ALADDIN'S LAMP!
I DON'T KNOW HOW SHE COULD HAVE GOTTEN SUCH ABILITIES-- MAYBE IT HAS SOMETHING TO DO WITH GROWING UP NEAR THE RADIATION RESEARCH THAT A.I.M. HAS BEEN CONDUCTING--
-- BUT UNLESS SOMEONE CAN COME UP WITH A BETTER THEORY, I THINK WE SHOULD GET USED TO THE IDEA THAT A.I.M.'S TARGET, THE ONE WE NEED TO PROTECT MOST--
--IS HOLLY-ANN
OH, GOD.
OH, GOLLY...!


FOR THE ADULTS, STRATEGY SESSIONS AND DEBATES RANGE FAR INTO THE FRAGILE SMALL HOURS BUT FOR HOLLY-ANN EMBER, A SOFT BLANKET AND A FAMILIAR COUCH BRING COMFORTING SLEEP.
IT IS A SLEEP WITHOUT DREAMS, THIS TIME, WITHOUT NIGHTMARES...
...A SLEEP OF EXHAUSTION AND INNOCENCE...
...A SLEEP POKED OPEN ONLY AT DAYBREAK, NUDGED GENTLY ASIDE BY THE HALTING NEARBY SOUNDS OF--
CRYING...?
MOMMY?
WHAT--OH, I'M SORRY, BABY. I--I DIDN'T MEAN TO WAKE YOU UP.
BUT WHAT'S WRONG, MOMMY?
IT'S NOTHING, SWEETHEART. REALLY, IT'S... WELL, YOUR FATHER'S MADE A DECISION, THAT'S ALL. HE'S GONE TO SEE THE COUNCIL.
HE'S GOING TO RECOMMEND THAT WE GIVE UP.
NO!
WE HAVE TO, HONEY! WHEN PEOPLE FIND OUT THAT YOU'RE THE ONE THOSE BAD MEN WANT, THEY MIGHT TRY TO TAKE YOU AWAY! THEY MIGHT HURT YOU!
BUT IF WE COOPERATE AUM. MIGHT JUST EXAMINE YOU, A-AND THEN LET US ALL GO AND AND...
OH, BABY, WHAT ELSE CAN WE DO...?
WE CAN FIGHT!
WHA--HOLLY! COME BACK--!
I KNOW DADDY THINKS HE'S DOIN' WHAT'S RIGHT--BUT HE'S WRONG!
SOMETIMES I DON'T UNDERSTAND GROWN-UPS.
STRONG PEOPLE GOTTA HELP WEAK PEOPLE! THAT'S WHAT HEROES ARE ALL ABOUT.
IF EVERYBODY JUST HELPED THEMSELVES, WE'D BE NO BETTER THAN--
WHAT, SAY, LI'L LADY?

OH, NO-- THEM!
AGAIN!
YOU SHOULDA GIVEN US THAT COAT WHEN WE ASKED PLITE-LIKE DARLIN'! NOW, YER GONNA BE SORRY YA EVER--
NO! L-LET ME GO! I'M DOIN' THIS FOR THE WHOLE TOWN!
F-FOR EVERYBODY!
E-E-EVEN YOU!
WHILE OUTSIDE THE TOWN HALL...
THESE ARE GOOD PEOPLE. NINE YEARS AGO I SWORE I'D PROTECT THEM. LORD KNOWS I'VE DONE THE BEST I COULD. BUT NOW..
DADDY!
WHA-- HOLLY-ANN! WHY AREN'T YOU AT--
DON'T DO IT, DADDY! PLEASE! WE'VE GOT THE HEROINES ON OUR SIDE! A-AND WE'VE GOT YOU, TOO!
YOU CAN SAVE US, DADDY! I KNOW YOU CAN!
HOLLY, I..
I WANTED TO FIGHT. REALLY, I DID. AND WHEN YOUR FRIENDS SHOWED UP, WELL, I THOUGHT WE MIGHT EVEN BE ABLE TO PULL IT OFF.
BUT HONEY, THE TOWN'S GIVEN UP AND WITHOUT THEM, EVEN WITH YOUR FRIENDS, I... I...
..I'M SORRY.
HE ENTERS THE TOWN HALL, AND AS HE PASSES THE PODIUM SEARED BY STORM'S LIGHTNING BLAST, HE HESITATES. THEN WALKS ON.
WHILE BEHIND HIM, HIS DAUGHTER'S HOPE TURNS TO FALLING TEARS...

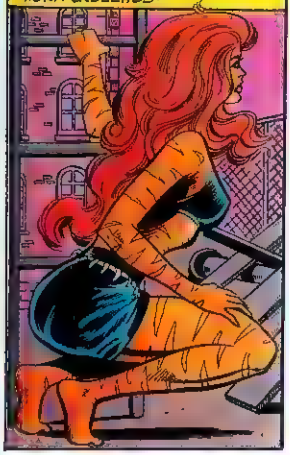
WELL, JOSEPH, YOU HAVE A PLAN?
I'M AFRAID NOT, MAYOR HOPPEL. NOT MUCH OF ONE, ANYWAY.
THE TOWN'S HEARTSICK, BONE-WEARY.. THEY'VE GIVEN UP TRYING. IT LOOKS LIKE THE ONLY CHANCE ANY OF US HAVE FOR SURVIVAL --
--IS TO SURRENDER THAT MIGHT NOT SIT WELL WITH THE TOWNFOLKS AT FIRST, BUT I'M SURE THAT AS SOON AS YOU EXPLAIN THE REASONS--
ME?! YOU EXPECT ME TO TAKE THE BLAME? TO GO DOWN AS THE MAYOR WHO TURNED VENTURE RIDGE OVER TO A BUNCH OF HOODLUMS? THAT'S POLITICAL SUICIDE! I RESIGN!
OH? AND LEAVE ME, AS CHAIRPERSON OF THE TOWN COUNCIL, TO BE THE SCAPE-GOAT? FAT CHANCE! I HEREBY DELEGATE MY AUTHORITY TO MY VICE-CHAIRPERSON, PASTOR WEEMS!
HOLY BIBLE
WELL, UH, I-I'M AFRAID MY PARISHIONERS MIGHT NOT UNDERSTAND! YOU SEE, GOD DOES WORK IN MYSTERIOUS WAYS, BUT, ER...
HEY, I'M JUST THE DOGCATCHER, BUT I AIN'T GETTIN' STUCK WITH THIS MESS! I QUIT!
I DON'T BELIEVE THIS!
AS HE STORMS FROM THE COUNCIL CHAMBER, JOE EMBER FINDS RAGE, HUMILIATION AND DISGUST VYING FOR HIS SOUL.
AND WHEN HE PASSES THE CHARRED PODIUM ONCE MORE HE NOT ONLY HESITATES, BUT STOPS. AND STARES..


AND LATER, IN AN AUDITORIUM WHERE THE BULK OF THE POPULATION OF VENTURE RIDGE HAS GATHERED IN NERVOUS EXPECTATION...
LADIES, GENTS, IT LOOKS LIKE I'VE BEEN, AH, "APPOINTED" TO GIVE YOU THE NEWS. AT FIRST, I THOUGHT I'D TALK ABOUT PRACTICALITY, ABOUT FACING THE FACTS. . ABOUT SURRENDER.
BUT NOW I'VE DECIDED TO TALK ABOUT WHAT ALL OF THIS IS REALLY ABOUT: COWARDICE.. AND COURAGE.
Y'SEE, THE PERSON THOSE THUGS WANT IS MY DAUGHTER, HOLLY-ANN. AND FOR A WHILE, I WAS GOING TO GIVE HER TO THEM.
I FIGURED THAT SACRIFICING ONE TO SAVE MANY WAS THE NOBLE THING TO DO. BUT THEN I REALIZED THAT THAT ONE HAD MORE GUTS THAN THE REST OF US PUT TOGETHER!
'CAUSE HOLLY STILL BELIEVES IN HEROES. SHE BELIEVES IN PEOPLE HELPING EACH OTHER. AND EVEN MORE IMPORTANT, AT LEAST FROM A SELFISH POINT OF VIEW--
--SHE BELIEVES IN ME.
SO I'M NOT GOING TO TELL YOU TO SURRENDER. I'M NOT GOING TO TELL YOU TO DO ANYTHING. I'M ONLY GOING TO TELL YOU WHAT I'M GOING TO TO.
AND THAT'S FIGHT THOSE BLOODY BASTARDS UNTIL THE LAST BREATH IS CRUSHED FROM MY BODY!
THE REST OF YOU CAN DO WHAT YOU WANT...
OH, DADDY, I'M SO PROUD OF YOU!
THANKS, SWEETHEART.
I'LL TAKE THAT SCATTERGUN, NOEL.

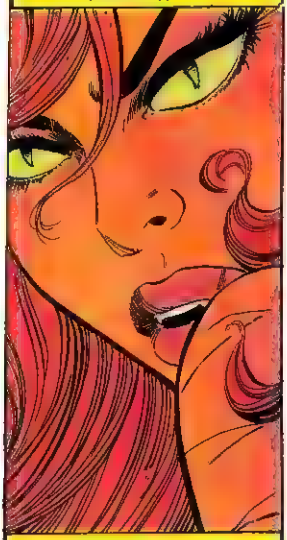

AND I'D LIKE TO BORROW YOUR RIFLE, ALEX.
BUT, MRS. EMBER--!
HE'S MY HUSBAND; SHE'S MY DAUGHTER. I'M STANDING WITH THEM.
THEY'RE NOT JUST STANDING WITH EACH OTHER, Y'KNOW-- THEY'RE STANDING FOR US!
YEAH, AND ALL WE'RE DOIN' IS QUAKIN' IN OUR BOOTS LETTIN' 'EM.
I FEEL LIKE TWO CENTS.
YOU FLATTER YOURSELF, KID! I'M 73 YEARS OLD, BUT I AIN'T LETTIN' NO FANCY-PANTS OUTSIDERS WALK OVER ME LIKE I WAS A PILE O' MANURE!
I'M WITH YA, SHERIFF! ALL THE WAY!
OLD MAN KESSLER'S RIGHT!
AND SO'S THE SHERIFF!
I'M GOIN' HOME AND GET MY .22!
AND I'VE GOT A HATCHET I CAN USE!
VENTURE RIDGE IS OURS, BY GOD! AND I SAY WE KEEP IT THAT WAY!
AMONG THE CROWD, A CHEER BEGINS TO RISE...
...AND FOR THE NEXT FEW HOURS, A FEVER GRIPS THIS SMALL WYOMING TOWN. FEVER BORN IN THE SPARK OF A LITTLE GIRL, FANNED BY THE COURAGE OF HER FATHER, AND CAUGHT BY THE DECENT CITIZENS OF VENTURE RIDGE.
BARRICADES ARE BUILT--
--WEAPONS AND AMMUNITION ALLOTTED--
--MEDICAL SUPPLIES STOCKPILED AND READIED... ALL UNDER THE WATCHFUL EYE OF SHERIFF JOE EMBER, A MAN WHO, IN REGAINING HIS OWN SELF-BELIEF--
--HAS IN TURN GIVEN IT BACK TO HIS TOWN.

NIGHT PASSES; PREPARATIONS ARE COMPLETED; AND AS THE SUN RISES OVER WHAT MAY WELL BE THE LAST DAY OF VENTURE RIDGE, ALL THAT IS LEFT IS TO WAIT.

IT HAS BEEN DETERMINED THAT THE SUPER-POWERED HEROINES WILL SERVE AS THE TOWN'S FIRST LINE OF DEFENSE, WITH ONE STATIONED AT EACH OF THE COMMUNITY'S FOUR SURROUNDING BORDERS. TO THE NORTH, TIGRA CROUCHES--



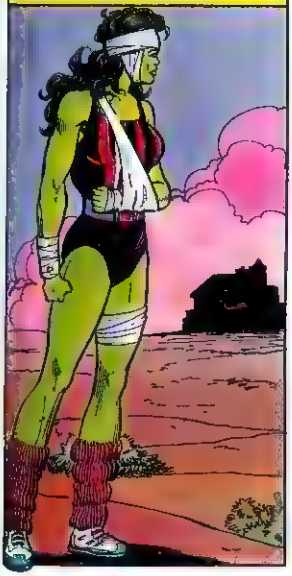
--HER FELINE SENSES FULLY OPEN, AWARE OF ANY SHIFT IN LIGHT OR SOUND...ANY ALTERATION IN TEMPERATURE OR AROMA...



... ANY NUANCE OF CHANGE.

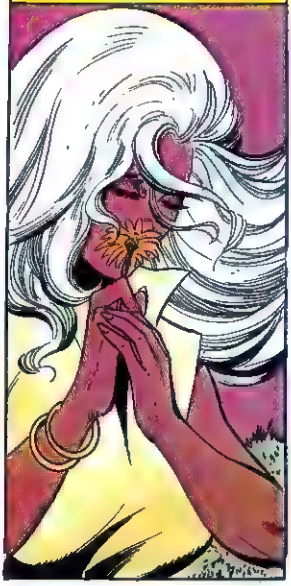
WHILE TO THE EAST, THE WASP RESTS BRIEFLY AFTER ONE OF HER MANY SHORT FLIGHTS TO CHECK THE INVISIBLE BARRIER, WATCHING ALL THE WHILE FOR THE SLIGHTEST SIGN OF ENCROACHMENT OR ATTACK.

AS TO THE WEST, SHE-HULK STANDS STIFF AS STONE, BATTERED BUT NOT BEATEN, RESOLUTE AND DETERMINED THAT NO ONE--NO THING--WILL GET PAST HER ASSIGNED POST.



AND AT THE EDGE OF THE SOUTHERN MESAS, STORM LINGERS IN SILENCE, ATTUNING HERSELF INWARDLY FOR THE BATTLE SHE KNOWS MUST COME--

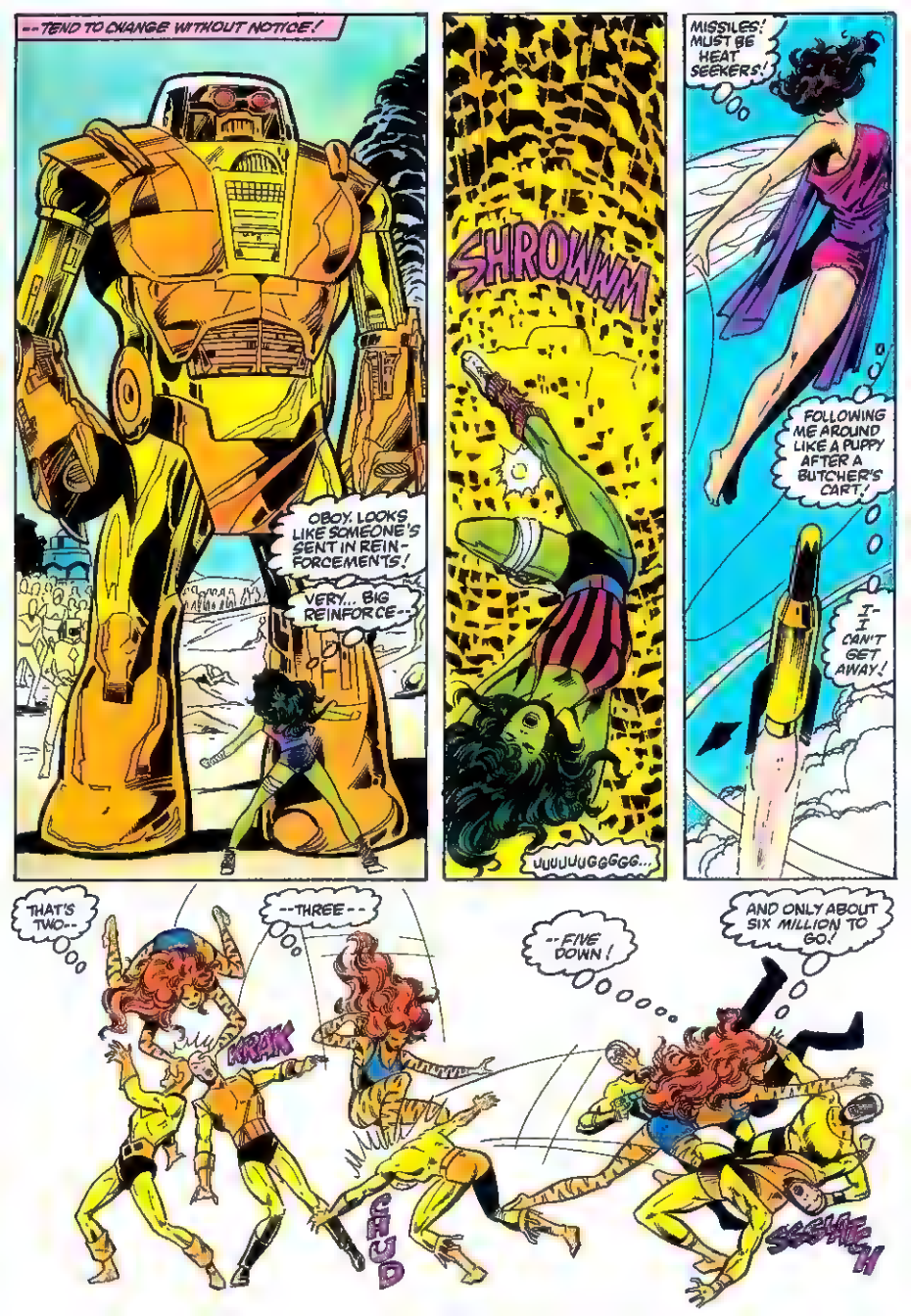
--WHILE YET APPRECIATING THE PEACE THAT REMAINS IN THE FRAGMENTS OF A DYING DESERT DAWN.

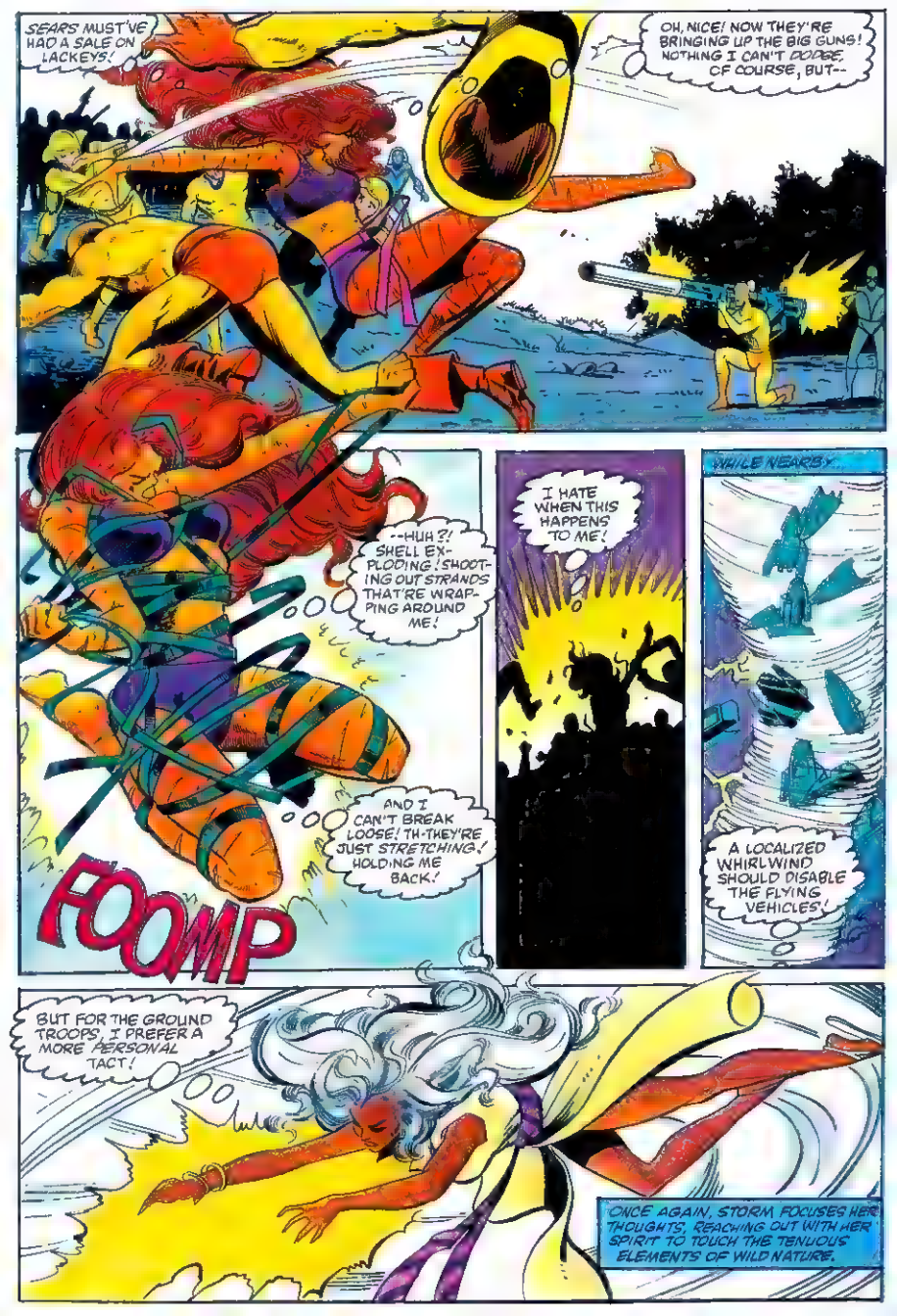


AS BELOW...
SIR! THE VILLAGERS ARE BUILDING FORTIFICATIONS! TAKING UP ARMS!
FEH. THE DEPTHS OF HUMAN STUPIDITY NEVER CEASE TO ASTOUND ME. ALL THEY HAD TO DO WAS SURRENDER--AND THEY COULD HAVE LIVED. IN SLAVERY, TRUE, BUT LIVED.
AND WHAT WILL YOU DO NOW, MY DARLING?
WHY, THE ONLY THING I CAN DO, MY LOVE.
CHAPTER 4
ATTACK!

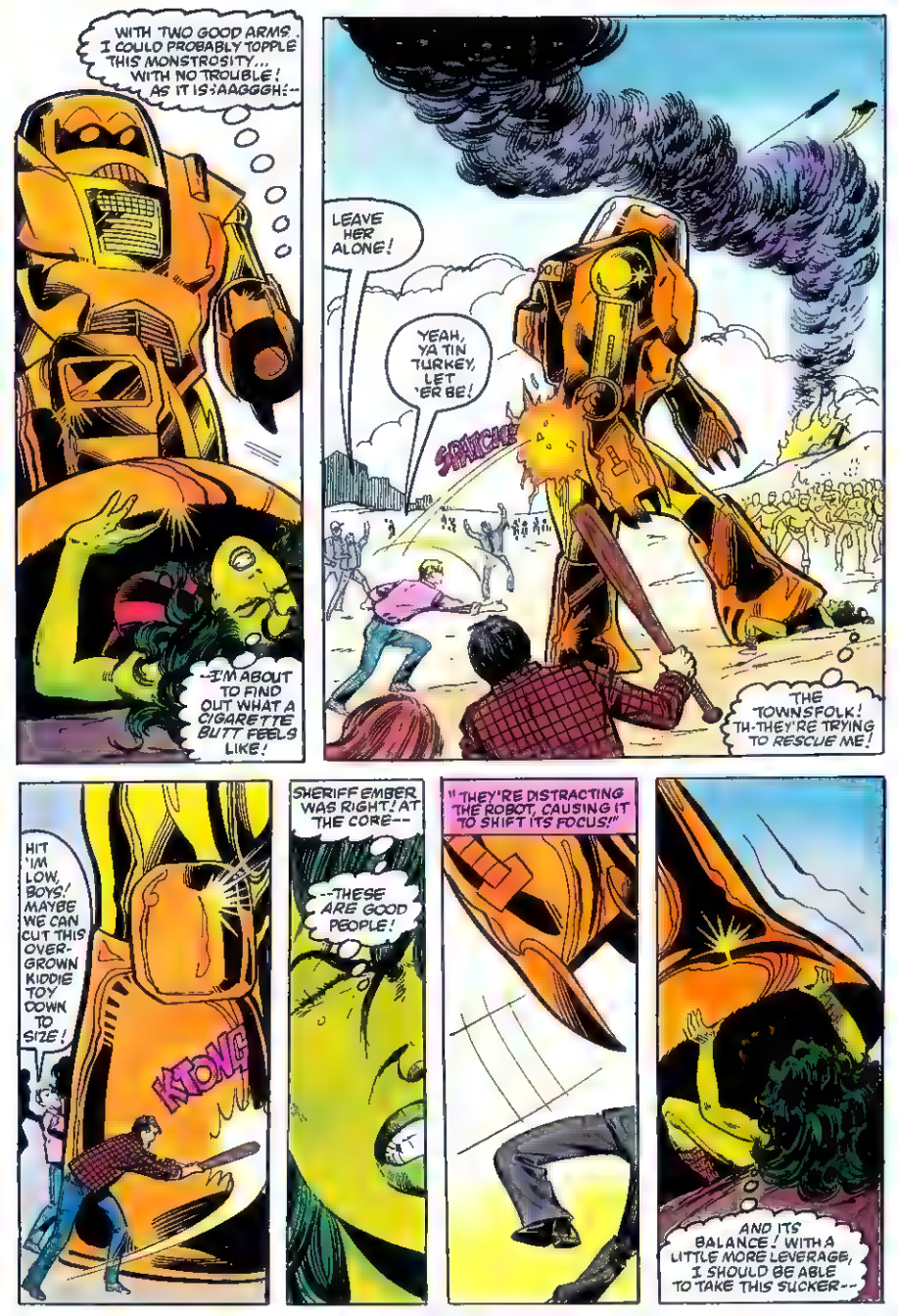
THE ORDER TAKES BUT MOMENTS TO GIVE-- AND EVEN LESS TIME TO EXECUTE!
HOLY--! THESE GOONS JUST STARTED POPPING UP OUT OF THE GROUND! THERE MUST BE A HUNDRED ALREADY, AND THEY'RE STILL COMING!
SOMETHING TELLS ME I'D BETTER WORRY ABOUT MY DISLOCATED SHOULDER LATER!
SOULLESS MERCENARIES! THEY SOUGHT TO SUBJUGATE THE FREEDOM OF AN INNOCENT PEOPLE! INSTEAD--
--THEY SHALL SUFFER MY FURY!
ZZRATCH

I HAVEN'T HAD THIS MUCH FUN IN A SCHOOLYARD SINCE I WAS TWELVE YEARS OLD!
GEE, I WONDER IF I'LL GET DEMERITS FOR "NOT INTER-ACTING WELL WITH OTHER CHILDREN"?
M-MY FACE!
A LITTLE ZAP HERE, A BIT OF BIO-STING THERE...
...I'VE GOT THESE GUYS SO CONFUSED THAT THEY'RE CRASHING INTO EACH OTHER!
SO FAR, THIS HAS BEEN EASY!
HOWEVER, THE TIDES OF WAR, LIKE THOSE OF FASHION...


--TEND TO CHANGE WITHOUT NOTICE!
OBOY. LOOKS LIKE SOMEONE'S SENT IN REIN-FORCEMENTS!
VERY... BIG REINFORCE--
SHROWM
UUUUUUGGGG...
MISSILES! MUST BE HEAT SEEKERS!
FOLLOWING ME AROUND LIKE A PUPPY AFTER A BUTCHER'S CART!
I-I CAN'T GET AWAY!
THAT'S TWO--
--THREE--
--FIVE DOWN!
AND ONLY ABOUT SIX MILLION TO GO!
KRAK
CHUD
SSSHHH

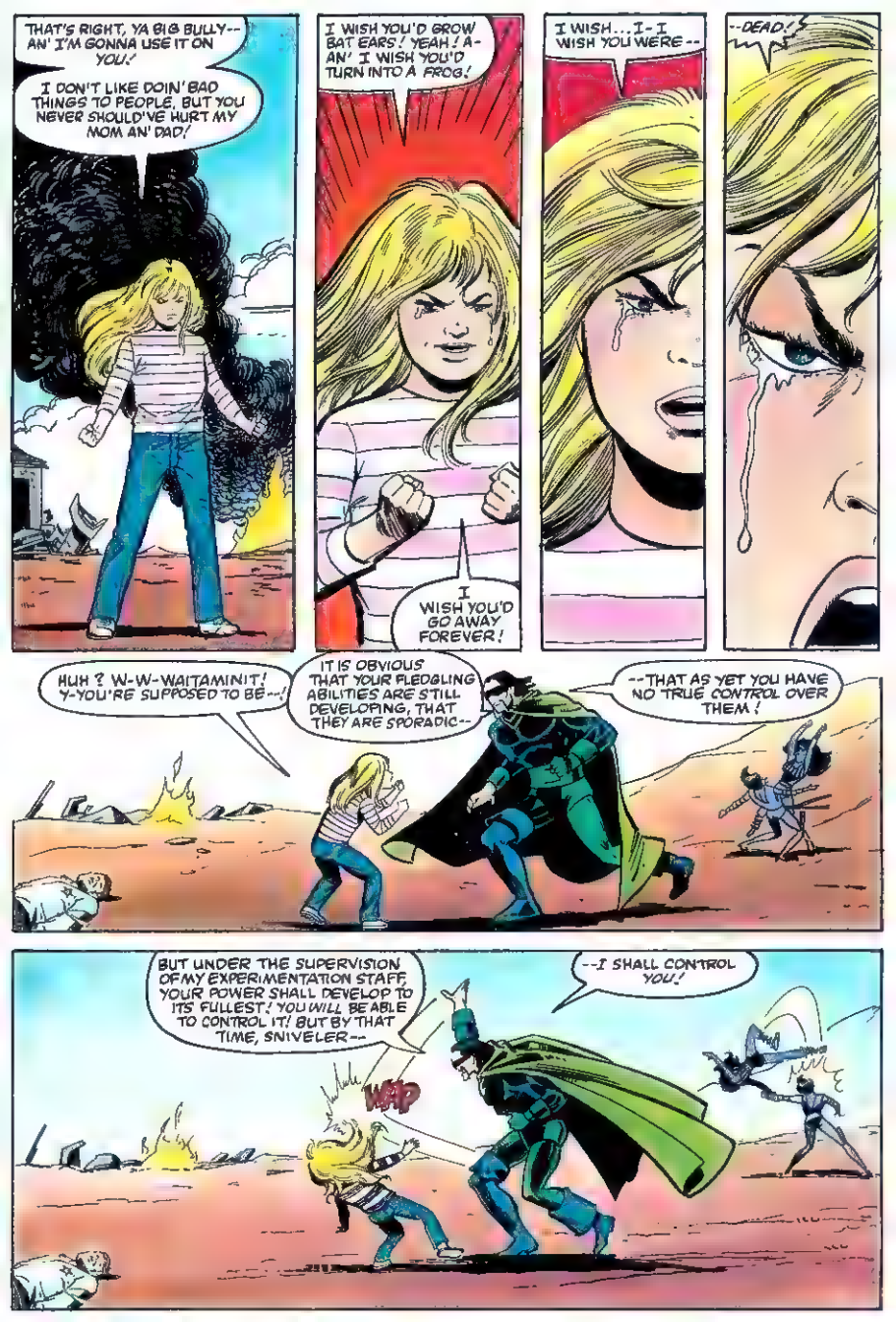

SEARS MUST'VE HAD A SALE ON LACKEYS!
OH, NICE! NOW THEY'RE BRINGING UP THE BIG GUNS! NOTHING I CAN'T DODGE, OF COURSE, BUT--
--HUH?! SHELL EXPLODING! SHOOTING OUT STRANDS THAT'RE WRAPPING AROUND ME!
AND I CAN'T BREAK LOOSE! TH-THEY'RE JUST STRETCHING! HOLDING ME BACK!
FOOMP
I HATE WHEN THIS HAPPENS TO ME!
WHILE NEARBY...
A LOCALIZED WHIRLWIND SHOULD DISABLE THE FLYING VEHICLES!
BUT FOR THE GROUND TROOPS, I PREFER A MORE PERSONAL TACT!
ONCE AGAIN, STORM FOCUSES HER THOUGHTS, REACHING OUT WITH HER SPIRIT TO TOUCH THE TENUOUS ELEMENTS OF WILD NATURE.

SHE BECKONS WIND... MOLDS LIGHTNING... AND AT LAST, IN ESSENCE--
--BECOMES THE TEMPEST!
AGAINST WHICH THE MERE METAL BEHEMOTHS OF MAN STAND NOT A PRAYER!
ZZZRAK
FRASHOW
UNTIL...
EARPLUGS IN? GREAT!
ACTIVATE THE SONIC PHASERS!
TH-THAT SOUND!
THE PAIN--!
I-I CAN'T THINK!
C-CAN'T EVEN HEAR... MY OWN THOUGHTS!
CAN'T CAN'T...


WITH TWO GOOD ARMS, I COULD PROBABLY TOPPLE THIS MONSTROSITY... WITH NO TROUBLE! AS IT IS:AAGGGH!--
--I'M ABOUT TO FIND OUT WHAT A CIGARETTE BUTT FEELS LIKE!
LEAVE HER ALONE!
YEAH, YA TIN TURKEY, LET 'ER BE!
SPRACK!
THE TOWNSFOLK! TH-THEY'RE TRYING TO RESCUE ME!
HIT 'IM LOW, BOYS! MAYBE WE CAN CUT THIS OVER-GROWN KIDDIE TOY DOWN TO SIZE!
KTONG
SHERIFF EMBER WAS RIGHT! AT THE CORE--
--THESE ARE GOOD PEOPLE!
"THEY'RE DISTRACTING THE ROBOT, CAUSING IT TO SHIFT ITS FOCUS!"
AND ITS BALANCE! WITH A LITTLE MORE LEVERAGE, I SHOULD BE ABLE TO TAKE THIS SUCKER--

--DOWN!
KRROMPSH
C'MON, GUYS! THAT LION-LADY NEEDS OUR HELP!
KARACK
'SCUSE US, MA'AM!
THANKS, FELLAS! BUT IF YOU DON'T MIND--
--THAT'S "TIGER-LADY"!
I'LL TAKE CARE O' THE GUY WITH THE GRITS BOX ON HIS HEAD, ALVIN!
RIGHT! AND I'LL SMASH UP THIS RADAR THINGY!
THERE, CHILD, YOU SHOULD FEEL BETTER NOW. PERHAPS A CUP OF HOT COCOA...?
YOU ARE MOST KIND.
AND SO IT GOES: FISTS AGAINST ARMOR, AXE HANDLES AGAINST GUNS, COMMON CITIZENS AGAINST TRAINED SOLDIERS, AS DESPITE ALL LAWS OF PROBABILITY--
-- THE TABLES BEGIN TO TURN!

JOE! W-WE'RE WINNING!
BUT WE HAVEN'T WON!
LOOK!
I WANT THE GREEN ONE!
SHE'S YOURS, MY LOVE! AND MY OWN BROADCAST POWERED GUARDSWOMEN WILL TAKE CARE OF THE OTHERS!
WHILE I TEND TO THIS MOTLEY CREW--
--PERSONALLY!
SSSSSSHAK
MOMMY! D-D-DADDY!
YOU... YOU'VE HURT THEM!
THAT'S RIGHT, HOLLY! AND HE'S GOING TO HURT US ALL A LOT MORE UNLESS YOU HELP! YOU'VE GOT TO USE YOUR POWER, HOLLY-ANN!
USE YOUR POWER!
HER?
SHE IS THE SOURCE OF THE POWER I SEEK?!


THAT'S RIGHT, YA BIG BULLY-- AN' I'M GONNA USE IT ON YOU!
I DON'T LIKE DOIN' BAD THINGS TO PEOPLE, BUT YOU NEVER SHOULD'VE HURT MY MOM AN' DAD!
I WISH YOU'D GROW BAT EARS! YEAH! A-AN' I WISH YOU'D TURN INTO A FROG!
I WISH YOU'D GO AWAY FOREVER!
I WISH... I- I WISH YOU WERE --
--DEAD!
HUH? W-W-WAITAMINIT! Y-YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE--!
IT IS OBVIOUS THAT YOUR FLEDGLING ABILITIES ARE STILL DEVELOPING, THAT THEY ARE SPORADIC--
--THAT AS YET YOU HAVE NO TRUE CONTROL OVER THEM!
BUT UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF MY EXPERIMENTATION STAFF, YOUR POWER SHALL DEVELOP TO ITS FULLEST! YOU WILL BE ABLE TO CONTROL IT! BUT BY THAT TIME, SNIVELER--
--I SHALL CONTROL YOU!
WHIP

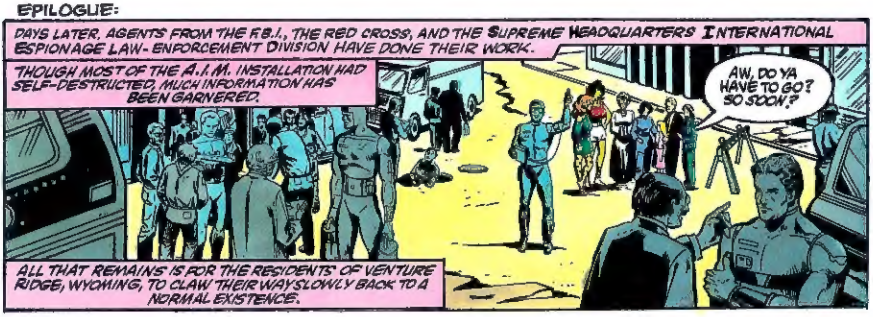
WHILE SOMEWHERE ABOVE...
WONDERFUL. HEAT-SEEKER ON MY TAIL--
--AND NOW SOME KIND OF A.I.M. AGENT IS FLYING STRAIGHT AT ME!
HMMM. THE AGENT IS FULL-SIZED--WHICH MEANS SHE MUST BE GIVING OFF MORE HEAT THAN I AM!
AND FAR BE IT FOR ME TO COME BETWEEN THINGS THAT ARE SO OBVIOUSLY ATTRACTED TO EACH OTHER!
PA-
BOOOOM!
I MAY NOT BE AS STRONG AS THIS SLIME-SNIFFER, BUT I AM SMART ENOUGH TO USE HER OWN STRENGTH--
--AGAINST HER!
NYAH.
SINCE THIS WARRIOR'S POWER IS BROADCAST, AN ELECTRICAL FIELD SHOULD DISRUPT HER RECEPTION! AND WITHOUT POWER--
--SHE IS AS EASY TO DISPOSE OF AS A DANDELION IN A SPRING BREEZE!

YOU GUYS OKAY?
I AM UNHARMED.
AND I'M HUNKY-DORY.
BUT WHAT ABOUT SHE-HULK?
DON'T WORRY ABOUT ME! THIS BROAD'S GOT SOME FANCY MOVES, BUT ONCE YOU GET USED TO THEM--
--SHE'S A PIECE OF CAKE!
KWAM
SAY GOOD-BYE TO YOUR FACE, LOVER-GIRL!
NO! L-LEAVE MY DARLING ALONE! IF YOU HURT HER I'LL... I'LL...
...I'LL KILL THE GIRL!
YOU'RE BLUFFING! SHE'S WHAT YOU'VE BEEN LOOKING FOR ALL ALONG!
THAT DOESN'T MATTER! POWER CAN BE CREATED! BOUGHT! STOLEN! BUT LOVE...
LET HER GO OR I'LL SNAP THE GIRL'S NECK LIKE A TWIG!
UNNNH... WH-WHAT'S--HOLLY! HE'S GOT HOLLY-ANN!
DROP HER, YOU MAGGOT!
G'NIGHT...
THUNK!

FIRST YOU TOOK MY TOWN FROM ME!
THEN YOU TOOK MY PRIDE!
THRUD
AND THEN YOU TOOK MY DAUGHTER!
CHRRR
SLAMP
WHRAK
WELL I'M TAKIN' 'EM BACK, YA HEAR?
AND GOD PITY THE MAN WHO TOUCHES ANYTHING CLOSE TO ME AGAIN!
BROK
EVER!

DADDY! STOP! Y-YOU DON'T HAVE TO HIT HIM ANYMORE! YOU'VE WON!
YOU... YOU'RE RIGHT, BABE. THERE'S NO NEED TO STOOP TO THIS SCUM'S LEVEL. AFTER ALL--
--I'M STILL THE SHERIFF OF VENTURE RIDGE.
YOU'RE UNDER ARREST, YOU SON OF A BITCH...

EPILOGUE:


DAYS LATER, AGENTS FROM THE F.B.I., THE RED CROSS, AND THE SUPREME HEADQUARTERS INTERNATIONAL ESPIONAGE LAW-ENFORCEMENT DIVISION HAVE DONE THEIR WORK.
THOUGH MOST OF THE A.I.M. INSTALLATION HAD SELF-DESTRUCTED, MUCH INFORMATION HAS BEEN GARNERED.
AW, DO YA HAVE TO GO? SO SOON?
ALL THAT REMAINS IS FOR THE RESIDENTS OF VENTURE RIDGE, WYOMING, TO CLAW THEIR WAY SLOWLY BACK TO A NORMAL EXISTENCE.

I AM AFRAID SO, HOLLY. WE HAVE DUTIES ELSEWHERE.
BUT WE'LL KEEP IN TOUCH. AND IF YOU'RE EVER IN NEW YORK, DROP BY AVENGERS MANSION! I'LL INTRODUCE YOU TO THE REST OF THE GUYS!
GEE, I JUST WISH I'D REMEMBERED TO BRING YOUR COSTUMES!
WHAT--?
WELL I'LL BE...!
Y'KNOW, WHEN HOLLY LEARNS TO CONTROL HER POWER ALL THE TIME, SHE'S GOING TO BE SOMETHING TO RECKON WITH!

I... I-I'M NOT SURE THAT'S WHAT WE WANT!
M-M-ME NEITHER!
YOU'VE A KIND HEART, HOLLY-ANN--IT WILL GUIDE YOU TO A WISE DESTINY. WHEN YOU ARE READY, AND IF YOU CHOOSE, COME TO THIS ADDRESS. THE PEOPLE THERE HELPED ME LEARN THE VISTAS OF MY OWN ABILITIES.
THEY MAY BE ABLE TO HELP YOU AS WELL.
WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS FOR HOLLY-ANN EMBER--THE LIFE OF A SUPER HEROINE, A HOUSEWIFE, A NURSE--IS UNKNOWN. BUT WHATEVER PATH SHE CHOOSES, SHE WILL TAKE WITH HER PRECIOUS MEMORIES: OF ADVENTURE, OF DREAMS COME TRUE, AND OF UNIQUE FRIENDSHIP THAT WILL LAST, QUITE POSSIBLY--
School for Gifted Children
PROF. CHARLES XAVIER
--FOREVER!